

WRITER AND EDITOR **SIMON CLARKE** ARGUES THAT TODAY'S COMPANIES ARE ALIENATING THEIR WORKFORCES BY BEING TOO FRIGHTENED TO ALLOW ANY PERSONALITY INTO THEIR COMMUNICATION



# Why corporate comms should **LIGHTEN UP**

**Do you enjoy reading corporate comms? I don't mean do you enjoy writing it – that's a different matter. But would you choose to read it in your spare time?**

Not many people would, according to a survey by an agency called 35 Communication, which claimed that FTSE 100 companies share the same grey, serious, identikit comms and branding.

"Major companies seem to be very cautious about the way they present themselves," says report author Nigel Forsyth.

Let's be clear: this isn't about comms being badly written. The Plain English Campaign has been exerting pressure for years now so communicators cut out waffle, jargon and management speak. Many organizations, from government departments and hospitals to banks and retailers, have taken the message on board, and are presenting information more clearly and more understandably to stakeholders.

But while clarity is a virtue, it says nothing about personality. What kind of organization are you? Do you have a character? Are you charismatic? Comforing? Dynamic? Do you, in short, charm me or inspire me into liking or admiring you and what you stand for?

The answer, so often, is no. Businesses and public sector organizations often seem very frightened of actually having a personality – as if being somehow identifiable risked harming their brand image.

But this misses a crucial point – squeezing out any personality from an organization risks damaging its brand just as much, if not more so.

Take the staff newsletter of the University for the Creative Arts (a document that's freely available on the web). This is an arts university based on a number of campuses around the Home Counties, whose raison d'être, one assumes, is to be creative, even cutting-edge.

The headline – 'Famous comic strip artist gives guest lecture at Epsom' – gives a flavour of the piece: serious, academic, detached. Remember, these are comic books – graphic art. A medium that often tends towards the exuberant. Does the copy bring any flavour of this to the reader?

Here's a hint: "Woodrow Phoenix, a writer, artist and designer, most famous for his comic

strip art work, gave a guest lecture at Epsom back in November. Woodrow, whose comic strips have been optioned by Disney, addressed a packed lecture theatre before signing copies of his book *Sugar Buzz: Live at Budokan*." It goes on to describe his latest graphic novel, *Rumble Strip*, as exploring: "the complicated psychology of the relationship between people and cars; how this affects the way we navigate the world and how we relate to each other with and through machines".

It's informative at least. And it's not badly written. But fun? It sounds more like a graduate research paper.

Go to his publisher's web site and you'll find a description that is much more evocative: "*Sugar Buzz* does for 60s and 70s cartoons what *South Park* does for *Peanuts* and *Viz* does for traditional British comics – we're talking loving deconstruction here, folks."

Which is more engaging? Even if you haven't picked up a comic since your childhood, one of these pieces of writing is much

more likely to make you curious to glance at Phoenix's work than the other – and it's not the UCA staff newsletter. Which is a shame, because the one comms message it should be giving out, but isn't, is that the university offers a creative environment in which to work.

Some companies do it right. Virgin is a good example of an organization that can jump into businesses as diverse as mobile telecoms, airline, financial products and cola drinks, while still retaining its unique identity. How? It has built its brand specifically by having a defined personality – from the cheeky headline "And now the serious stuff" on an annual report, to its irreverent comment about its chairman: "So who's the guy with the beard? Check out his blog to find out all about Richard Branson."

Yes, it would be a brave local government that could match Virgin Mobile's forthright "phone blocked? Oh PUK! What you need is a PUK code to get back up and running" message.

But while your comms don't have to be edgy to have character, they do have to have character to give them an edge. ⇨

## Don't be afraid of Facebook

Companies are running scared of allowing their staff free access to social networking sites such as Facebook because they worry that it eats into productivity. But what is the value of a business? Mostly it is its network of contacts, customers and suppliers, and its ability to develop these over time.

How do younger people network these days? Yes – through sites such as Facebook.

Like it or not, the next generation of employees – and customers, and suppliers – is embedded

in such web-based social networking. Some more enlightened companies have acknowledged that allowing some access to Facebook and its ilk may boost morale and so aid staff retention. But this still fails to understand the power and future significance of the medium.

Younger staff don't just use it to waste time. It is the centre of their communications network. Most people under 25 think e-mail is an old person's communications medium – they are into instant messaging, mobile video and

imaging, text messaging.

Take resources such as Facebook away from them and you risk crippling the networking ability of the next generation of workers. And that means crippling the networking ability of a business.

Is it possible to make social networking technology an asset to the organization? Absolutely. According to *ComputerWeekly*, a major airline is using Facebook to manage its crew schedules, while management consultancy Capgemini is using it to coordinate

a new staff orientation programme. Meanwhile, US financial services company Northwestern Mutual uses Facebook to help its representatives develop their marketing profile for clients and prospects.

Yes, it's a management challenge, but just as guidelines can be prescribed for internet access, so they can for social networking sites.

Let's face it – it would be insane in most organizations to ban e-mail, or the phone. Social networking is becoming just such a fact of corporate life.