

March 2007 - Volume 24, No. 2

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Submission deadline for the next edition is April 7, 2007. [Click here](#) to submit or for further details

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Why aren't employees paying attention?

By Alison Davis 

The following scenarios are true. Only the names have been withheld to protect the innocent.

A telecommunications company's intranet home page features four or five news stories about the company, which are updated nearly every day. A well-read story gets about 2,000 unique hits; some get only several hundred. Since the company has more than 25,000 employees, which means that only 8% read even the most popular content.

At a major pharmaceutical company, the statistics are similarly depressing. An electronic newsletter sent weekly to more than 40,000 employees is only opened by about 10% of them.

And recently, at a financial services company, an intranet story that took weeks to write, edit and get approval for — one that provided a behind-the-scenes perspective on a major deal — was viewed by fewer than 300 of the company's 5,000 employees.

What seems to be the trouble?

I've just spent the past year or two exploring the challenge of getting people's attention; the result of this inquiry is captured in a new book, *Your Attention, Please*, that I've co-authored with New York Times columnist Paul B. Brown. There's no doubt that the root cause of modern attention deficit is information overload.

Feeling info-overloaded? No wonder!

The volume:

- 62 billion emails are sent every day - 75% are spam.
- 5 billion instant messages are sent each day.
- More than 18,000 magazines and 60,000 books are published each year.
- The U. S. Postal Service handles more than 200 billion pieces of mail.
- 98% of all information is transmitted by phone.
- 69% multi-task while online, 69% while watching TV and 40% while reading newspapers and magazine.

The result:

- Professionals spend 53% of their time searching for information.
- 70% of people feel overwhelmed by the amount of email they receive.
- 69% multi-task while online, 69% while watching TV and 40% while reading newspapers and magazine

Virtually everyone with a TV, a phone and a computer is besieged by incoming information. And as the problem intensifies, so does the likelihood that employees will delete emails without reading, multitask while "watching" a videocast, and ignore the intranet altogether.

But information overload is not the only reason employees aren't paying attention. In fact, when it comes to internal communication, a significant problem is one we communicators have the power to change - because we're actually responsible for causing it.

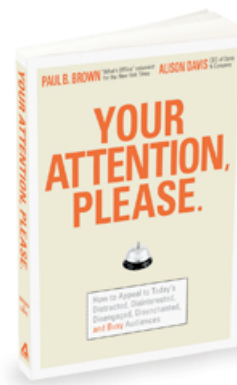
The problem is the content.

It's just this simple: Too much of the information we provide to employees doesn't fulfill their expectations or meet their needs. In research my firm has conducted with thousands of workers at dozens of companies, the majority of employees give communication content low scores for being:

- **Old news**
By the time the information is sent out, employees know it already.
- **Boring**
It's too long, too corporate, too dull.
- **Complicated**
Employees feel that information is often over their head or outside their experience. Either way, it feels too much like school.
- **Irrelevant**
Communication is usually so general that it doesn't answer the key questions, "What does this mean to me? What do I need to do?"

Why do so many communicators spend so much time creating content that's ignored by so many employees? Two reasons:

1. We don't know enough about employees' preferences and needs. Great marketers create detailed profiles of their customer groups, which are based on extensive knowledge of customer demographics, habits and values. But, even if we do have good employee data, too many communicators make assumptions that what interests us (or the other people in headquarters) will interest employees. That's also part of the second problem.



in common with the "average Joe" employee. In fact, when it comes to communication needs, the two are opposite.

Attributes	Senior executive	Average Joe employee
Education	MBA or other advanced degree	HS or college graduate
Income	\$1 million +	\$35,000
Spends workday	Meeting, gathering information, analyzing, making decisions	Completing tasks
On weekends	Flies to Martha's Vineyard	Drives to the lake
Gets news from	<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	NewsRadio 880
Prefers information that is	Analytical, extensive, complete	Simple, to-the-point

Notwithstanding these differences, leaders often dictate both what the message will be and what medium will be used to convey the message. The result is communication that appeals to the inhabitants of the executive suite, but gets ignored by the other 98% of the organization.

What can be done?

As with all intractable problems, awareness is the first step toward rehabilitation. We need to understand the extent of the issue by really listening to what employees are telling us - not just in surveys, but by the way they're using (or ignoring) our communication.

And then we need to swallow our pride and ask employees what they want. Like everyone today, employees are sophisticated media consumers. They are willing and able to give tangible suggestions about how to change communication to meet their needs.

Naturally, there's a lot more to getting people's attention than simply asking about their preferences. But it's a great way to start.



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Alison Davis is a Past President of CCM and co-author (with New York Times columnist Paul B. Brown) of the new book, Your Attention, Please: How to Appeal to Today's Distracted Audiences (Adams Business 2006) and is CEO of employee communication firm Davis & Company. To learn more about the book, visit www.yourattentionpleasebook.com. Attend Alison's presentation on corporate attention deficit at our CCM Conference in Memphis next month or reach her at alison.davis@davisandco.com