

India's First Corporate ezine

Issue No 39 – May 2009

Published by Prime Point Foundation



Prof. Martin Eppler

Theme of this Issue
Information overload

Guest Editor
Prof. Martin Eppler

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PR-e-FACE: From the desk of International Editor

How to combat information overload?



We've all heard about information overload, but did you know that too much information is also a silent productivity and motivation killer in the workplace?

The New York Times reported on a survey that estimated the loss of information overload to the U.S. economy was \$650 billion. A workplace survey done by LexisNexis in the U.S. reports that more than seven in ten American white collar workers feel inundated with information at their workplace, while more than two in five feel that they are headed for an information "breaking point."

A survey conducted by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) reported that three out of four users say they receive too much e-mail. The biggest cause of information overload was found to be external news sources and professional subscriptions (61 percent), followed by co-workers (39 percent), professional networks (34 percent), team/department sources (29 percent) and companywide corporate sources such as senior management and HR (23 percent).

Regardless of whether we have been affected by information overload directly in our professional or personal life, it is important to understand our unique role as communication professionals and how we may be contributing to the problem. As senders of information to journalists, employees and other audiences, we should take a step back and examine the quantity and quality of our communication periodically.

In this issue of PR-e-Sense, we hope to highlight this topic from the perspectives of both senders and receivers of information.

We are honoured to have Prof. Martin Eppler as a guest editor for the issue. Prof. Eppler is an eminent professor at Switzerland He is also the co-author of a recent research report on this topic commissioned by the IABC Research Foundation.

I hope the articles in this issue will not only make you more aware of the problem but also help you consider creative ways in which you can reduce your own (or your organization's) contribution to the problem.

Archana Verma

Guest Editor



Prof. Eppler is a chaired professor of information and communication management at the University of Lugano (USI), Switzerland where he teaches managerial communication and knowledge management, and conducts research on strategic decision making and strategy communication. He is also the co-author of a recent research report on this topic *Preparing Messages for Information Overload Environments* commissioned by the IABC Research Foundation.



PR-e-FACE: From the desk of Guest Editor

What is information overload and why should you care?

The situation is all too familiar: 50 new e-mail messages in your inbox, four reports that await your attention, a new intranet section you should review, an interesting website to check out, plus the new issue of a trade journal that you should read and pass on to colleagues. Not to mention the two business books you have put aside. And all of this while preparing and attending numerous meetings and workshops, answering phone calls from colleagues and clients, and thinking about solutions to pressing problems. You are experiencing information overload—too much information, too little time. But, as a professional communicator, you might actually be part of the problem.

When your information processing needs exceed your information processing capacity you are experiencing information overload, a state where more information actually reduces your reasoning and decision quality. More information leads to less knowledge. Because of this, you feel overwhelmed by information and unable to make the right decision (the so-called paralysis by analysis). You may even feel annoyed, stressed, frustrated, or angry. Information overload occurs when more information results in lower decision accuracy.

So far, this topic has been mainly addressed from a receiver's or audience point of view. There are numerous

surveys that show that information overload is a huge problem for the productivity of most employees in organizations. In addition, there are over thirty years of research on the topic. However, overload is not only caused by the quantity of information (i.e., its volume and intensity), but also by more qualitative aspects, such as its ambiguity, diversity, or novelty. Communicators can thus actively control these aspects and reduce overload for their target groups.

We recently partnered with the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Research Foundation on a report *Preparing Messages for Information Overload Environments*. This report helps bridge the gap and addresses the information overload issue from a sender's viewpoint and offers examples of what companies are doing to manage the issue.

Details of where you can find the IABC report are available in this issue of PR-e-Sense. You will also find articles about a global survey of communication professionals on this topic and a few simple ideas that you can use to reduce information overload for your internal and external audiences.

Martin Eppler

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When your information
processing needs exceed
your information processing
capacity you are
experiencing information
overload



PRestige:

By and large, India is an under-communicated society



Mr Madan Bahal, Managing Director, Adfactors Public Relations, one of the top 3 PR Companies in India shares his views exclusively for PR-e-Sense. He can be reached at madan@adfactorspr.com

Please listen to his podcast interview at www.prpoint.com/madan

Q: How do you define information overload?

A: An information overload situation exists when you have multiple sources of communications focusing on the same subject simultaneously. The situation has a negative impact when multiple sources are communicating divergent views and positions on the same subject making it difficult for the viewer or reader to form a perspective. In the Indian context the consumer experiences this Phenomenon with respect to news television.

Q: How do you perceive whether the corporates in India and other countries provide optimum level of communication or are they overloading information?

A: I think India by and large suffers from the opposite problem. India is an under-communicated society. Most of our corporates communicate too little to too few people and constituencies. The communications in India do not often reach all the stakeholders.

Q: What is the impact of information overload on the stakeholders - positive and negative?

A: On the whole there is no negative impact of information overload on the stakeholders. It is better to err on the side of over communication than under communicate. Let the public have all the information and be empowered to make informed choices.

Take the internet for example. One might say that there is an information overload on any subject. But the consumer is free to access what he wants, when he wants and from where he wants. He is free to form his opinions and judgements based

on an adequate appraisal of the information available. One can say that the information available on the internet has accelerated democratisation of human society in the last decade. The negative impact situations in India are few. In the case of consumer communications information overload sometimes creates excessive expectations. If the product finally doesn't measure up, or is not available, the impact will be negative.

Q: Can you mention any of the case studies, which you might have come across from your experience?

Relevance, adequate communication, adequate reach and timeliness are four principles of 'optimum communication'



A: Some recent car launches in India come to mind. Excessive communication probably led to unreasonable expectations and also created a feeling amongst consumers that it might be difficult to get allotments. So many potential customers may have simply stayed away from applying.

Q: How do you feel we can optimise the communication?

The first principle is relevance. The second principle is adequate communication – give out everything that is necessary for the audience to form an opinion or perspective. The third principle is adequate reach – ensure that your communication reaches all the people it is supposed to. The last principle is timeliness.

Seven Simple Ideas to Reduce Overload in Communication

Below we provide you with seven simple ideas that you can use to reduce information overload for your internal and external audiences:

- 1. Time it well:** Provide information when it is needed or when it is likely that it will receive the most attention. Avoid peak times when employees or clients feel tired or are busy with other things.
- 2. Overview first:** Provide an overview (what the information is about) and a context (why it is important and to whom) for your messages first, and only then confront your audience with more detailed information.
- 3. Visualize!:** Use simple and systematic diagrams or visual metaphors to summarize your messages and help readers get an overview of your main points.
- 4. Keep it consistent:** Use a consistent and clear structure for your messages that remains the same over time. This way, readers already know how your messages are structured and do not lose time understanding what is where.
- 5. Make it personal:** Try to tailor your messages to your audiences' needs and preferences. Addressing people personally (i.e., using their name in an e-mail), or pointing to issues or people that interest them, engages people on another level and helps them to focus on your messages.
- 6. Make it interactive:** Communication is a two-way street. If people can actively engage with your messages and work with them, they will be able to more easily process them. Already Confucius said: I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.
- 7. Make it accessible:** Using illustrative metaphors or employing simple analogies, intriguing stories or examples all help to make complex content accessible to a diverse audience and thus lower the risks of overloading them.

Courtesy: IABC's *Communication World* magazine





About the IABC Report

The IABC report *Preparing Messages for Information Overload Environments*, was co-authored by Prof. Martin Eppler and Jeanne Mengis. It proposes practical principles, methods and examples of how business communicators, as information producers, can contain information overload. The report presents 16 real-life examples of how to reduce overload in communication, summarizes key insights from previous studies on the topic and translates them into action items for readers.

The researchers also offer six simple principles to reduce information overload in business communication. Business communicators can use the six principles as a simple checklist to monitor how their messages are received, understood and remembered. These six communication principles are:

- **Familiar surprise:** How can I convey my message in a motivating and original yet accessible way?
- **Detailed overview:** How can I put details into context and give my audience an overview and/or preview?
- **Flexible stability:** Which recurring, efficient format or structure can I use in my communication that is easily recognized but also sufficiently flexible?
- **Simple complexity:** What does my target group really need to know? What can I leave out? How can I relate my message to what people already know (leverage previous knowledge)?
- **Concise redundancy:** How can I make my message accessible to different people in different ways? How can I provide different gateways to understanding?
- **Unfinished completeness:** How can I involve, stimulate and engage my audience? How can I get them to apply the information and transfer it to their own context?

"We phrase these principles as paradoxes that stimulate communicators to apply message reduction and transformation mechanisms in a balanced manner to reduce overload," says co-author Jeanne Mengis. "If business communicators want to reduce information overload, they have to embrace paradoxes and engage in a communication that is both simple yet complex, concise yet redundant, familiar yet surprising."

The report was commissioned by the IABC Research Foundation and sponsored by IABC/Seattle, Chase and American Standard. The complete report is available free to IABC members at

<http://www.iabc.com/members/pdf/InformationOverload.pdf>

Listen to an interview with Prof. Eppler on the IABC Cafe2Go podcast:
<http://blogs.iabc.com/cafe2go/2009/02> .



SINCE LAST ONE YEAR... I HAVE NOT SEEN ANY EPISODE...
ANY PROGRAMME... ALL THE TIME IS SPENT ON
" SURFING... ONLY..."



FOR BETTER MARRIED LIFE...
BE AWARE OF...
" INFORMATION OVERLOAD"...
DON'T TRY TO GET MUCH
INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR "WIFE"...

**MARRIAGE
CONSULTANTS**





Learn to manage Information overload – I

- By Philip Joshua, Nagarjuna Construction Company, Hyderabad

- 1. Schedule your time better in advance. Are you checking your e-mail between every other task you perform? Break that habit by trying to limit your trips to the inbox to specific time periods during the day, such as an hour at the beginning and end of the day, or 10 minutes at the top or bottom of each hour. You'll be amazed by how much more time you'll have to accomplish things that matter more to you.**
- 2. Cloak your instant messaging screen name or, if that's not possible, put up the "Do Not Disturb" sign on your instant messenger once in a while to carve out some uninterrupted time. During this span, also let your phone calls go to voice mail and text messages go temporarily unanswered. These actions are particularly important during times when you're interacting with people face to face; except in rare circumstances.**
- 3. Learn to determine and rank the urgency of each message you receive, regardless of means. Delete, file or ignore unimportant ones, and devote as much time as possible to only those that pertain to pressing or essential issues. When you look back on your day, you'll discover that you'll experience a greater sense of accomplishment when you do this.**



Learn to manage Information overload – II

- By C J Singh, CEO, Core PR, Chandigarh

Microsoft Outlook is one of the great tools that helps you manage horde of emails that arrive. One, it becomes one central hub to receive emails from your all accounts into one box wherein you can allocate these to automatically reach the desired folder. Two, it helps in quick retrieval through an internal search module. Three, you can manage your contacts and add new ones as the email arrives. You can mark the spams so that automatically future mails get transferred to your junk mail account.

However, the only tip that I can give to the email users is not to keep the emails pending. You can flag them for future reference, but even that I have found that after a day you tend to receive more emails and the earlier ones get forgotten. The best advice is to respond immediately, which is the best way to check.





A journalist's perspective of Information overload

**By Pritha Roy Choudhury Freelance Journalist,
New Delhi**

The whole world is gripped with the fear of Swine flu. Nearly 1,00,000 people across the globe are victims of the H1N1 virus responsible for the killer disease. Newspapers are flooded with information on the disease. But people are confused about the virus and its origin. After all WHO might soon declare it a pandemic. So, I decided to write a piece on the origin of the virus.

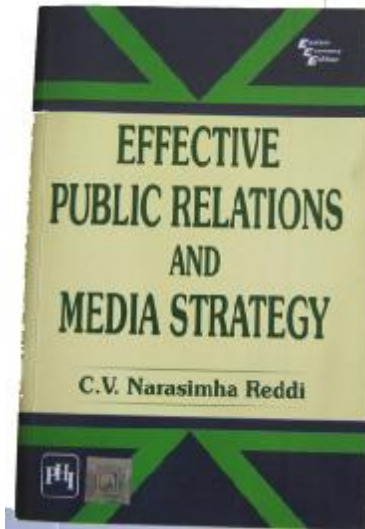
I browsed through various write ups on the net. And yes, I did find information, not one but many. Which one's true, I wasn't sure. Thanks to the information age, the resultant of being overloaded. One is indeed unsure which is right and which is not.

The only option left to me was to talk to experts. Some researchers said, the virus had originated in the avian host which was later transmitted to swine population. Some others said, the virus is a result of human error. I did come up with my piece, with a wish that this too does not get lost in the load.

Netiquette – While sending bulk mails

1. While sending common mail or invitation to many people, do not give out the email ids of your contacts in the 'To' column. This may lead to misuse of email ids for spamming.
2. Use 'mass mailer software' for sending bulk mails, so that the recipients will not know the mail ids of others. Or use BCC facility.
3. Even when you receive such mails with lot of email ids under 'To' column, please do not send private replies to all. Respond only to the sender. Take care while clicking 'Reply to all'.
4. If you are a member of un-moderated discussion groups, do not send personal mails to the group. While responding to such mails, do not respond to all, unless it is relevant. Otherwise, respond only to the author.





Latest book on PR – April 2009

Effective Public Relations & Media Strategy

Author: Dr.C.V.Narasimha Reddi, Hyderabad

Publisher : Prentice Hall of India Learning Pvt. Ltd. Delhi

507 Pages - Rs. 350/-

For details: drcvn@hotmail.com



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3

Global Forum for Public Relations (GFPR) launched their Chennai Chapter on 9th May 2009. The launch was followed with an UnConference on “Communication during recession”. The entire team of office bearers are less than 30 years of age. Many young professionals and students participated and shared their views.

Sakthi Prasanna, Chairman, Chennai Chapter (picture 1) and Raja Marthandam, Secretary (Picture 2) addressed the participants after launch. In the UnConference that followed after launch, many eminent people across the country shared their views and interacted with the participants over phone. In picture 3, Narrendiran (Vice Chairman) and a participant Amena are seen interacting with a CEO on phone during UnConference.

PReTTY

Recession – Is it due to ‘Information overload’?

This Story is about a man who once upon a time was selling Hotdogs by the roadside. He was illiterate, so he never read newspapers. He was hard of hearing, so he never listened to the radio. His eyes were weak, so he never watched television. But enthusiastically, he sold lots of hotdogs. He was smart enough to offer some attractive schemes to increase his sales. His sales and profit went up. He ordered more a more raw material and buns and use to sale more. He recruited few more supporting staff to serve more customers. He started offering home deliveries. Eventually he got himself a bigger and better stove. As his business was growing, the son, who had recently graduated from College, joined his father.

Then something strange happened. The son asked, "Dad, aren't you aware of the great recession that is coming our way?" The father replied, "No, but tell me about it." The son said, "The international situation is terrible. The domestic situation is even worse. We should be prepared for the coming bad times." The man thought that since his son had been to college, read the papers, listened to the radio and watched TV. He ought to know and his advice should not be taken lightly. So the next day onwards, the father cut down his raw material order and buns, took down the colourful signboard, removed all the special schemes he was offering to the customers and was no longer as enthusiastic. He reduced his staff strength by giving layoffs.

Very soon, fewer and fewer people bothered to stop at his hotdog stand. And his sales started coming down rapidly, same is the profit. The father said to his son, "Son, you were right". "We are in the middle of a recession and crisis. I am glad you warned me ahead of time."

Moral of the Story: It's all in your MIND! And we actually FUEL this recession much more than we think we do!!!!!! !!

Source : Unknown



Editorial Team gratefully acknowledges the support given by Ms Archana Verma, Director of Marketing and Communication, International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) for all the coordination and inputs. She is also the International Editor of our ezine.



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