

The Debating Group



A Parliamentary forum for Media and Marketing Debate

Will communications need a human touch in the future?

The debate held on 24 January 2005 at the House of Commons on the motion ‘In future communications won’t need a human touch’ was dedicated to the memory of Dennis Lipton. It was sponsored by the Publicity Club of London of which Dennis Lipton had been a member for 40 years. He was also Vice-Chairman of the Debating Group. He was passionately interested in the art and science of marketing so this debate was particularly apposite. The debate was chaired by Lord Howie of Troon.

Sandy Walkington, currently Director of Public Affairs, BT Group, but who will shortly be moving to the Liberal Party as Director of Communications, proposed the motion. His perspective was from lobbying for telecommunications and ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and he pointed out that there is a revolution happening across the globe. “The Next Generation Broadband Networks which are being installed will transform our lives... they will be Internet Protocol-enabled at the core and wireless at the edge. You don’t need to worry about the detail, just that you will be always best connected – fastest, cheapest, most secure and stable – whether at home, in the office, on the move or on the pause. Information will be stored, manipulated, presented as you want it – transposed from text to voice or voice to text, if that is convenient, to your mobile phone, to your PDA (Personal Digital Assistant), to my spectacles”.

Sandy Walkington went on to say that we just do not know what these new networks will do. It is simply unimaginable. He compared the applications of electricity, which were unheard of when the electricity grid was built. “In my own lifetime the change has been nothing short of breath-taking in applications of electricity. Yet this is slowcoach stuff compared with the world of the Internet, which effectively did not exist before 1995. These new ultra-broadband networks are meeting investment cases today and being built simply to permit faster Internet access with all that means for the transmission of moving pictures and multi-media applications. We don’t know what wider applications will be spawned, but one thing is for sure: it will be hugely dominated by machine-to-machine conversations and transactions. Self-evidently communications will not all need a human touch and that should be something we should welcome and embrace”.

Sandy Walkington argued that there are two types of communication. There is the transfer of information or data and huge amounts of our current communication are bound up with doing that. Then there is the creation, sharing, modification and interpretation of thoughts, ideas and information between two or more human beings. He wanted to spend much less time or none at all on the first and get much more of it to happen, and then spend more time in a more informed way on the second. This is based on the concept of 'ambient intelligence' – different things in the environment all around us doing things for us, a world of 'chips with everything'. "They will be having tens of thousands of conversations all the time, non-stop, sharing information on a real-time basis, information flowing into whatever receiver you have on your person – mobile phone, PDA, Blackberry, intelligent clothing, spectacles, whatever. A stream of intelligence will come in your direction and you don't have to worry about it, spend time on it or interpret it. Until suddenly one piece of information is relevant to you and you get it instantly. You won't have to worry about it unless you have programmed it for something you are interested in". Sandy Walkington gave examples of intelligent labelling: finding the right stockist of a particular art book; intelligent labelling of clothes so that the washing machine is automatically set to the right cycle, labelling of fridge stocks so that everyday staples that run out are automatically ordered on-line. He suggested that such technology would take the dreariness out of people's lives.

Health is another area which could be dramatically transformed. 10% of the NHS budget is spent on diabetes, 80% on chronic conditions. A vast amount of this expenditure is spent on routine examinations and check-ups. There is now a real prospect of remote diagnostics transforming this, with daily information being sent swiftly and automatically over broadband connections to a central computer. There is no human intervention, unless or until there is something out of the ordinary which requires a personal examination. The cost savings are potentially immense, yet this will improve people's lives rather than diminish them. The same remote monitoring – machine to machine – can help old people stay in their homes for much longer.

Sandy Walkington concluded "Now and in the future communications will not need a human touch and we will be in a better world for it, with more room for human things".

Human spirit

Opposing the motion, Andrew Wyte, Head of Corporate and Public Relations, BBC, began by quoting *St John's Gospel*: "In the beginning was the word". He continued, "These words have always spoken to me about the centrality of communications to the human condition. For me, communication, interaction with other people, is at the heart of what it is to be human, to experience life". He quoted Virginia Woolf: "The interest in life does not lie in what people do, nor even in their relations to each other, but largely in the power to communicate with a third party".

This debate was about the *business* of communication, but Andrew Wyte contended that the theory and practice of communication cannot be divorced from human life. Communications theory bears this out. Aristotle, in *The Art of Rhetoric* implies that

communication is premised on speakers and audience interaction. Most modern communications theory stresses the importance of face-to-face communication. The best communication puts the individual at the centre of the communication process. Websites about change management stress personal leadership and ownership by individuals. In politics there is enormous power in an individual's presence. Politicians at conferences, rallies and on TV use the skills which Aristotle would have recognised.

Andrew Wyte quoted one of the founders of mass communication, Edward Bernays, who defined PR as 'The engineering of public consent'. His campaigns were about engagement with emotion.

Andrew Wyte pointed out how much human endeavour has been dedicated to the improvement of communication:

- The invention of writing
- The printing press
- The telegraph and the telephone
- Film and TV – the defining medium of the 20th Century
- Of course, the Internet
- Teletext etc

Each of these was initially met with cynicism and scepticism. In some cases there was outright opposition. But each of these was a major shift. Each one resulted from human beings striving to communicate. Each might in its own time be hailed as a great step forward. But interestingly each was not only the result of human progress, but also unleashed by an outpouring of human talent and creativity. What is constant is the human spirit, bonding together.

Andrew Wyte concluded "In future communications will have a human touch, because ultimately, without a human touch there are no communications".

Day-to-day applications

Seconding the motion, Robert Boyle, Partner and Leader of Entertainment & Media Group, Pricewaterhouse Coopers, focused on the day-to-day applications, where the end user may often be a human but the delivery is automated. The answer to the question in the motion is not really whether the human touch will be eliminated but when. He cited the Google search engine, Amazon's service to let you know when a book similar to the one you have purchased is available and Internet travel sites as examples of automated services.

The communications channels, such as broadband and digital TV, which are already becoming far more powerful using technologies such as 3G mobile and MPEG compression are set to become almost universally available over the next 5-10 years. This will enable much greater interaction between consumers and computers. Robert Boyle said "I believe an increasingly computer aware and sophisticated audience will prefer to be educated, informed or sold to by clever software rather than, for example, a slippery salesman". People prefer interaction with sophisticated technology.

Domestic applications include meter readings, remote setting of central heating, fridges which recognise when staples are low, security arrangements and so on. But the implications are wider than the domestic sphere. Personal media devices, digitisation and online technologies are leading fragmentation of the delivery system. Technology will be able to reach people who need the message. In future there will be a greater ability to deliver the right message to the right people. People's creativity will be deployed to ensure that non-human forms of communication can do things better than humans: in fact do things human can't do at all. Voice recognition is developing rapidly so soon you won't even have to 'touch' the buttons.

The human touch

Seconding the opposition, Greg Turzynski, Experience, began by proposing a hypothetical experiment in which his presentation was communicated electronically to the audience. He suggested that communicating in this fashion would take about two and a half hours and so reverted to speech. Advances in technology would make such communication possible one day. Technology is amazing, but he asked "does that mean that even more technology is better?"

The dot.com boom was based on a belief that electronic commerce provided the means to ignore all the rules of marketing, sales promotion and distribution that we had learned. We took the customer out of the mix. Customers were numbers and all you needed were lots of them. For some, the new communication tools provided the means to lower the cost of customer acquisition to such an extent that new business arose, eg low-cost airlines. There are many success stories, but at the end of the day considerably more failures.

There was something missing in the dot.com model and that was any respect for customers: they were simply numbers. So along came Customer Relationship Management. This was born out of the fact that there was no Customer Relationship at that time. It soon became clear that these virtually attained customers were not customers in the spending sense of the word. They were Registered, but not spending. Customers did not want to be managed; they wanted to be served. Taking the human touch out of communications was a disaster.

Interactive Voice Response (IVR), a telephony technology in which someone uses a touch-tone telephone to interact with a database, to acquire information from or enter data into a database, does not require human interaction over the telephone as the user's interaction with the database is predetermined by what the IVR system will allow the user to access. Greg Turzynski read a letter from a disgruntled user of NTL's IVR system to illustrate the response you can get when you take the human touch out of communications.

Greg Turzynski concluded "If you work in media or marketing and you want to acquire or retain some customers, don't forget the human touch".

Discussion from the floor

- If Sandy Walkington's tie, which is a repeated message about BT, could tie itself, the contributor would vote for him

Against the motion

- The speakers for the motion are confusing technology with the ability to source. Communications are because we need to communicate – to exchange views and experiences. Technology is an aid and important to our business, but relating and exchanging experiences is a human activity. The proposers' argument is flawed because they confuse saving time on research and sourcing with communications.
- No technology will ever work without the human touch.
- Technology has to have a human touch. Even if the response is automated, it must sound like a human person and respond in a way that a person would.
- Where does the software for technology come from? Programming is done by people.
- It's not what people say, but what they hear that matters. This will always be true, however technology advances.
- Other forms of communication – art, writing, music – which have great powers of communication, require a human touch. The contributor could not imagine a world without any human touch.
- Technology has taken time from people without giving anything back. The contributor would support the motion when technology recognises that you don't want choice by telephone.
- Just because something is technologically possible, does not mean that we want it.
- The contributor pointed out that there was confusion between information and communications. Communication between people is via eye contact and you can assess messages by gestures. Newspaper communication is one-sided. The consumer receives the message but cannot send it back. Real communication is between people communicating with each other.

For the motion

- Sadly in future communication will not need a human touch and we will all be the worse for it. The contributor banned computers from his office because he found he was sending emails to his staff instead of speaking to them.
- The contributor prefers his communications not to have the human touch, so that he can make up his own mind, and there is no spin.

Summing up

Summing up for the opposition, Andrew Wyte remarked that his case had been made by the quality of the debate. He pointed out that contrary to the proposers' suggestion, the BBC had announced redundancies face-to-face.

Even at the cutting edge of technology people choose human contact. Politicians go out to their constituencies using word of mouth communications.

Research by BMRB into which forms of communication most influenced customers' decisions to purchase found 5% quoting online, 15% quoting TV and 77% believing a friend's recommendation carried the most influence. The human touch is, by a factor of 5, the most influential communication.

Society values human interaction. Andrew Wyte cited the phenomenon of 'Flashmob'. Messages on the Internet had resulted in a pillow fight in Trafalgar Square and participation in an opera experiment on Paddington Station.

Technology can enable better communication, but if you want to see technology without a human touch read *1984*.

The 'Velvet Revolution' was also an example of people harnessing technology for public good. Technology is our tool, but communications must have a human touch.

Summing up for the motion, Sandy Walkington agreed that interpersonal communications require a human touch. However, the transfer of data and information does not need a human touch. It is remarkable how far the Internet has progressed in 10 years. The motion talks about the future. Things are advancing all over the world, transferring the way technology works. Machine to machine communication can provide better management of chronic disease. This is a fantastic prize that this country can have.

Sandy Walkington also had confidence that in 10 years a tie would be able to tie itself!

The result

The motion was defeated by a show of hands.

Next Debate

The next debate will take place on Monday 14th March 2005, sponsored by the Periodical Publishers Association.

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