

## Random Ramblings

25<sup>th</sup> April - 25<sup>th</sup> July 2007

By David Wike

### 25th July 2007 - Bugs, in the team and back to school.

It is indicated that figures will be released later today that show there is a 10% chance of catching MRSA or C Diff if you are in hospital in England and Scotland. This is an appalling figure. Whilst still not good, the figure for Wales is down to 6% and falling. The Welsh have introduced a number of measures that have resulted in this impressive improvement. One in particular struck a chord with me. All cleaning is now carried out by staff employed directly by the hospitals, not by contract cleaners.

Does it surprise me that this makes a difference? No, not at all. Thinking back to earlier days in my industrial career, we had cleaners who were allocated to a particular area and we got to know them, to chat to them - in other words, they became part of the team and took a pride in 'their patch'. In more recent times when cleaning was outsourced there were frequently changing personnel - presumably the contractor just viewed them as a resource to be deployed wherever. From my observations, some were, not surprisingly, less committed to their task.

Increasingly companies outsource elements of their work. This is particularly true where the workload isn't constant or where the economic environment is uncertain and there might be a need to downsize. In many cases this works very well where supporting organisations have a level of expertise and resource that would not be sustainable for smaller businesses to employ in-house. However, it is important for businesses to ensure that they don't lose control of critical areas of their operation by this approach. All suppliers, and especially those providing key support, should be treated as an extension of the main business. They should be kept closely involved with the objectives of that business and consulted on a frequent basis.

Several times recently I have referred back to previous Random Ramblings that have subsequently become topical once more. This week I have gone one better by referring to an item that in turn refers back to an even earlier report! Back on Valentine's Day I wrote: 'Last week my friend Trevor Gay was a facilitator at a conference, attended by the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, called The Skills Challenge: A Public Debate - a debate about the challenges faced by the UK economy following the publication in December of the The Leitch Review of Skills. Random Ramblings on the 13th December reported the view of the Leitch report that the UK is "on track to achieve undistinguished mediocrity" if it fails to upgrade the skills of its workforce by 2020.'

As a spin-off from the above, quite out of the blue an opportunity has arisen to be involved with a pilot scheme which looks at developing a culture of enterprise and innovation in schools. Nine schools have been selected for this trial; each will have a mentor from the business world working with the head teacher to develop proposals and action plans. Some poor unfortunate Birmingham head teacher has been lumbered with yours truly!

As has been well documented, the UK economy is rapidly moving from one of traditional large manufacturing companies to one of small businesses. Increasingly it is becoming an enterprise culture where new skills will be required. The basics of numeracy and literacy will become even more important as low skill jobs disappear, and there will also be a need to understand fundamental business skills as well. In that respect, programmes like Dragons' Den can only be helpful in bringing to the fore the attributes required to succeed in business.

### **18th July 2007 - Expensive chocolate, PR, ghost blogging, paying for Potter.**

Although the precise details seem a little confused, what is quite clear is that Cadbury's failure to maintain high standards of food hygiene has been a very expensive mistake. On Monday the company was fined £1 million by Birmingham Crown Court for nine offences which resulted in salmonella in chocolate products. This is little compared with the £30 odd million that is reckoned to be the cost in terms of the resulting product recall and lost sales. The court appearance has brought further unwanted publicity for the company - who said any publicity is good publicity?!

I will repeat a paragraph from my 14th March Ramble:  
Gary Hirshberg, who describes himself as the father of three teenage yoghurt-eaters, is Chairman and Chief Executive of US company, Stonyfield Farm, the world's leading organic yoghurt producer. His philosophy is: "Quality, quality, quality: never waver from it, even when you don't see how you can afford to, keep it up. When you compromise, you become a commodity, and then you die."

Seems a pity that Cadbury's senior management apparently didn't share Gary Hirshberg's view.

The extracts from Alastair Campbell's diary shown on TV were fascinating. They gave an insight into the impossibility of the job when every word written or spoken would be analysed by the media, looking for 'a story'. They also showed how all the words uttered by Tony Blair had been carefully planned. It reminded me of the Morecambe and Wise show in the sense that what looked to be off the cuff or ad-libbed had, in fact, been very carefully rehearsed.

Of course, all senior people, whether they be politicians or top business managers, have words written for them by the PR/press department. Quotes attributed to these luminaries are rarely uttered by them. In fact they may be completely unaware of what they are quoted as having said. It is also common practice for autobiographies to be ghost written by professional writers. However, it seems that the art of ghost writing has taken a new twist with the advent of the ghost blogger.

Yes, it seems that some bloggers are just too busy to blog in person and are now employing ghost bloggers. However, I can assure all readers that Random Ramblings is all my own work without a ghost in sight. Well, that is unless it is a poltergeist that is responsible for my current frequently dropping Broadband connection.

Now as far as I am aware, Joanne Rowling doesn't employ a ghost writer to create her Harry Potter stories. Random Ramblings on the 13th June looked at organisations that don't or won't pay their bills on time. Ms Rowling's publishers Bloomsbury were in a rather stronger position than most when it

came to demanding payment from supermarket giant Asda. Pay up or you don't get the new Harry Potter book to sell. Amid mutterings from the supermarket about the price of the book, they promptly paid up rather than risk being the only major retailer not to have said book on their shelves for its launch this coming weekend.

### **11th July 2007 - Should we be more noughty?, mixed fun, VFM, benefits and motivational techniques.**

Recently, Tom Peters in his blog ([www.tompeters.com](http://www.tompeters.com)) talked about how paying cash, rather than using a credit card, makes one more aware of actual spend. He then went on to talk about his days at the Pentagon and how the admiral in charge of his department always insisted that full numeric values were used i.e. \$2,300,000,000 rather than \$2.3bn. His thinking was that all those noughts made people appreciate just how much of the taxpayers' money was being spent.

A while back I sat in on a meeting of the Prince's Trust where applications for business start-up loans were being discussed. One young man wanted a couple of thousand pounds to start his proposed business. I had read his business plan several times over - in fact I'd been through it with a fine tooth comb. It seemed reasonably sound, although one or two aspects appeared 'challenging'. At the meeting I was moved to comment that I was used to dealing with business cases with rather more noughts, but I had never agonised so long over one. In the corporate environment it is all too easy to become blasé about the odd thousand pound or two, but in this person's life it was a big deal.

Over the weekend we were spoiled for choice when it came to watching highly paid sports people. The Grand Prix at Silverstone had its moments as did the two Wimbledon singles finals. But for me the event of the weekend was the mixed doubles final. Why? Well apart from half of the winning pair being British, it was a joy to watch Jamie Murray and Jelena Jankovic having such fun. Doubles matches often have their moments of humour, but never before have I seen anyone enjoying themselves so much, whilst focussing sufficiently to win. Previously I had watched the delightful Miss Jankovic in a singles game. She was just the same, smiling whether things were going her way or not.

It is interesting to look at the prize money in this first year when Wimbledon has paid men and women equally. The singles finals winner receives £700,000 with the runner-up getting half that amount. The men's and women's double winners are paid £222,900 per pair i.e. £111,450 each, but in the mixed doubles Murray and Jankovic 'only' received £45k each. Now while I would be pretty pleased to get forty five grand for a few days work, it still seems a tad unfair to me as Jamie and Jelena provided me with more enjoyment than their more highly rewarded sporting colleagues.

While on the subject of pay inequalities, Marks & Spencer has revealed that chief executive Stuart Rose received £3.6m in salary and bonuses last year. This would seem to make Gordon Brown rather underpaid at a miserly £188,848.

One often ponders the question of is he or she worth what they are paid when it comes to these super-high earners. Perhaps a better question would be value for money (VFM) when considering pay, prize money or indeed, any goods or services that we might buy. In other words, what are the benefits received against the cost. All too frequently we look at the cost without fully considering the benefits.

It seems that the Office of Fair Trading upset some estate agents by encouraging consumers to shop around for those offering the lowest fees. As has been quite rightly pointed out, for many sellers, professional competency and high quality service are more important. The saving of quarter or half a percent on fees may seem attractive but is easily negated if the agent doesn't get the best price for the property or minimise hassle for the vendor.

And finally, to return to Wimbledon, Jelena Jankovic revealed the inspiration behind winning the Wimbledon mixed doubles title with Jamie Murray: "I was motivating him every time. When it was break point I was telling him 'hit a good return because you know you are gonna get many more kisses!'"

Murray responded by claiming he has already forgotten about regular men's doubles partner Eric Butorac as, "Eric doesn't give me any kisses...I'm with Jelena now!"

In these days when companies worry about staff motivation and retention, perhaps this will give them something to think about!

#### **4<sup>th</sup> July - Japanese reliability, teaching entrepreneurs, communication, right goes left and no pigs.**

Once again a survey, in this case carried out by Which? shows that owning a Japanese car is likely to be a more satisfying experience than one made elsewhere. Their Kaizan (implement - measure - improve) approach to continuous improvement probably isn't much different from manufacturers in other parts of the world. It's just that they got there first and have applied it more rigorously than most. However, even that isn't enough to survive in today's increasingly competitive world. Innovation, change and re-invention are all words we hear more and more. These are words that successful entrepreneurs would recognise.

The government believes that enterprise should be on the school curriculum. In his last Budget, Gordon Brown announced a further £180m over three years to continue funding for enterprise education in the UK. The scheme has been running for several years, yet apparently many schools are still trying to work out just what enterprise education involves. The CBI has suggested seven key "competencies" to be delivered through enterprise education, namely: numeracy; communication and literacy; IT skills; self-management; team working; problem solving; business and customer awareness.

Last year I took part in an enterprise day at a local grammar school. The pupils, aged 14 and 15 were set tasks by local business people. They had to work in groups to develop proposals for various business ideas. They then had to present them everybody taking part - probably 100+ in total. The thing that impressed me most of all was the confidence and ability of those doing the presentations. As we know, communicating with large numbers isn't easy. Ask Gordon Brown!

Whether you loved or hated him, few would disagree that Tony Blair is a communicator without equal. It is often said that the actual words used represent only a small percentage of a successful communication. I am sure that the messages being delivered by the new PM are important but listening to him speak is marginally less entertaining than watching the rain at Wimbledon. My advice? You write the words Gordon but ask someone else to deliver them.

Sir Digby Jones, late of the CBI and now the new Minister of State at the catchily named Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform generally manages to get his message across fairly clearly. His views could probably be described as fairly right-wing; he certainly hasn't always been the greatest fan of the current government, so his new role is interesting. I can visualise some entertaining exchanges with his civil servants!

And finally, I have just been reading what is claimed to be an actual letter sent to David Milliband in his previous role as Secretary of State for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, otherwise known as DEFRA. The letter starts:

*Dear Secretary of State,*

*My friend, who is in farming at the moment, recently received a cheque for £3,000 from the Rural Payments Agency for not rearing pigs. I would now like to join the "not rearing pigs" business.*

*In your opinion, what is the best kind of farm not to rear pigs on, and which is the best breed of pigs not to rear? I want to be sure I approach this endeavour in keeping with all government policies, as dictated by the EU under the Common Agricultural Policy.*

The letter goes on to explain that the writer proposes to start on a small scale and gradually build up to not rearing thousands of pigs. But being enterprising, he also envisages profitable schemes for not doing several other things as well. For the full letter, go to [www.success121.com](http://www.success121.com) and subscribe to John Niland's monthly bulletin.

## **27th June 2007 - Benefits, celebrity, advertising, speed and mud.**

Before spending money on services we tend to think 'Is it worth it' or more probably 'How much? Good heavens!' (or other exclamation). I wonder how many of us consider the benefit rather than just the cost. Strangely we don't seem to apply the same scrutiny to clothing or other fashion purchases. The fact that there is a 'designer label' is sufficient justification.

We are now inundated with a new kind of designer label, that of 'celebrity'. Get your talents (or lack of) on television and it seems that you can name your price. As an example, Saira Khan, runner-up in the first series of The Apprentice said in an interview, "Last year, I earned over £100,000 from media work. Before The Apprentice I was on £30,000." Now I am not decrying the lady's talents for one moment, but the reality is that it is media exposure that has allowed her to benefit from them.

I was pondering on the different ways to advertise and the relative costs and benefits. This cerebral activity was brought on by a number of things, not least the arrival of a new Yellow Pages directory. Inevitably, as I unwrapped said yellow book, several advertising leaflets fell out. The same happens when the local free paper is delivered. And when on Saturday morning I collect our only paid for paper, the Telegraph, again I am inundated with more advertising.

If your business uses this method of annoying me, you will be disappointed (but perhaps not surprised) to know that it all goes straight into the recycling box. So please stop annoying me and think of more creative and customer friendly ways to bring yourself to my attention.

If you are heavily into advertising, you might be interested and even amused to read in Ireland's monthly marketing magazine, Brendan O'Broin's Stray Thoughts on the techno-sexual generation  
[www.marketing.ie/jun07/article2.htm](http://www.marketing.ie/jun07/article2.htm)

And so I move swiftly on to Le Mans! Well, you can't be anything other than swift at this famous venue for the 24 hour race that took place over the Father's Day weekend. Audi won for the second year in a row with their R10 diesel car, which was some ten laps ahead of the second placed Peugeot, also diesel powered. Ten laps of this very long circuit may sound like a walk in the park, but strange things happen when you race for this long. Audi lost its first car early on when it remodelled the crash barrier after being caught out by a sudden rain storm, and the second of the three car line-up also visited the barrier when a rear wheel came off while leading after some 17 hours of racing.

Manufacturers like Audi and Peugeot spend tens of millions of pounds to go racing at Le Mans and yet the TV coverage by the major channels in the UK is non-existent. One wonders about the effectiveness of this form of advertising given that the UK is one of Europe's major car markets. The other strange aspect of the lack of TV coverage is that Le Mans is a very British race in many ways. This year just over a quarter of a million people turned up, with estimates of the UK proportion being up to 90,000.

So what is it that gets endless TV coverage of the Glastonbury mud, but nothing of Le Mans that can also do mud quite well when it rains, like it did the first time I visited the place a few years back? Is it that the promoters fail to promote it, is it that the contestants have spent all their money on the cars and have nothing left for a bit of advanced PR?

### **20th June 2007 - The 3 Rs and the benefits of flexibility.**

Last week the government's Skills Envoy Sir Digby Jones said, "With seven million adults who are functionally illiterate and 11 million who cannot add up two three-figure numbers, the social and economic cost of an unskilled adult population is fundamentally damaging to Britain's chance of winning in the 21st century."

In a TV interview he pointed out that these sorts of figures had always existed, but in the past with millions employed in manual work, the effect of this had been masked. But now that traditional industries were closing down in the face of the challenge from the low cost economies of the east, Britain's economy was rapidly developing in directions where literacy and numeracy are absolutely essential.

The government is challenging employers to sign a pledge to improve the basic skills of their workforces. The "skills pledge" was launched at an event also attended by Chancellor Gordon Brown and Education Secretary Alan Johnson. The pledge is to support all their employees to develop basic literacy and numeracy skills and work towards a full Level 2 qualification, equivalent to five good GCSEs.

Apparently the UK has a greater proportion of workers with low skills than competitor countries such as France, or Germany. A spokeswoman for the Department for Education and Skills said there were no sanctions on businesses that did not sign the skills pledge, but added: "Employers that don't do this will be left behind."

The UK is also being left behind when it comes to providing flexible working arrangements according to a report by the Equal Opportunities Commission. Of 8,000 firms quizzed, 90% in mainland Europe made flexitime available, compared with 48% in the UK. Only one in five UK firms gave staff chances to work away from the office. This was half as many as in nations such as Germany and Denmark.

It seems both David Cameron and labour deputy leadership candidate Harriet Harman feel that there should be some kind of legislation to 'encourage' flexibility. I have to say that I tend to support the view of the Institute of Directors that, "Regulation has a poor record in both encouraging innovative practice and in producing solutions that do not have unintended consequences, discriminating against smaller businesses in particular."

If you want a first hand account of how flexible working arrangements can be applied, even in a manufacturing production line environment, you could do no better than read 'Maverick' by Ricardo Semler. I have sung the praises of this book several times previously during the course of these Rambles. Incidentally, Semler's book also talks often of the benefits of not interfering, but letting the front line staff decide for themselves how best to organise things.

Of course, I totally embrace the concept of flexible working arrangements, so a little earlier I put this into practise. I was sitting at the PC, feeling a somewhat weary and making little progress on the tasks in hand. So off I went for a brisk walk for forty minutes or so. As a result I now feel energised and able to make progress. And of course, the forty minutes out of the office will be made up later in the day.

### **13th June 2007 - Dishonest or incompetent?, price hikes, entrepreneurial UK and flushed communications.**

I have come across several instances recently where large organisations have failed to pay their debts at the due point. It seems that despite the Late Payments of Commercial Debts Act, small firms in particular often struggle to get paid for their services. Apparently the cashflow problem caused by this is a significant factor in the demise of more than ten thousand small businesses each year.

I am sure that many would have gone to the wall anyway and some almost certainly contribute to their own downfall by failing to bill accurately and on time and then chase their debts strenuously. However, not paying up on time is a major scandal. Often this will be as a result of an incompetent system but often it is little short of theft as it is a conscious decision not to pay or to drag out payment as long as possible.

The Act allows small firms to claim interest on overdue payments from other companies. Firms are entitled to claim 8% above the Bank of England base rate on any payment not received within 30 days of invoicing (unless a longer credit period has been agreed). If more businesses did that, backed up by legal action, the situation might be improved for everyone. You can read the full act but you might find the explanation on this link clearer: <http://www.payontime.co.uk/downloads/commercialdebts.pdf>

Price rises are another contentious area. I was reading an article on the subject that suggested price changes could be disguised by changing the offering in some way, and that the objective was to push the price up until the customer winced but still paid. A well known national chain of sports clubs has just restructured its membership options and has used this tactic to increase prices significantly - way above inflation. I am sure that most customers will wince and pay, but this seems a very unsatisfactory way to treat longstanding customers.

A recently published report suggests that, within three years, half of the UK GDP will be generated by entrepreneurs who have developed business ideas from scratch. Actually, haven't all businesses done that at some stage? I presume that they mean relatively recent starts as opposed to longstanding, traditional businesses. This is yet another indicator of something that has been discussed in these Rambles previously, and that is the growing trend towards self-employment rather than working as an employee in the traditional industries.

Good communications are indispensable to success, and the Internet has been a vital tool for many businesses, providing research and marketing opportunities that previously would have been beyond their means. And the mobile phone is another essential business tool for many. So why I wonder do we Britons flush £342m of mobiles down the loo every year?! Apparently it's one of the most common ways to lose phones. Actually, one of this column's regular readers has tried washing his along with the garment whose pocket it was stored in ... twice! Now that's what I call careless!

I was recently treated to live footage taken by a CCTV camera being used for a drain and sewer survey, but I didn't spot any mobiles down there. And I was quite pleased that the operator didn't seem particularly bothered about shaking my hand on departure!

### **6th June 2007 - Logos and slogans, deliver what you promise, fly green.**

Last week I was following a van belonging to the regional water company, Severn Trent. On the back was the slogan, "Your water safe in our hands." Then there was a graphic of a pair of cupped hands holding some water. Until brought to my attention, it had never crossed my mind that the local water was anything but safe, so perhaps not a particularly smart advert. And as for trying to carry water in your hands ... well, that's about as sensible as eating soup with a fork!

When you start to look around, there are some pretty meaningless slogans about and some equally daft logos. It might be worth having a look at how your business presents itself to make sure that you haven't fallen into the same trap. Now, when the graphic designer came up with those two circles in my logo, was it an attempt to represent the two main elements of the business or was she suggesting that it was a load of ... spherical objects?!

And then there is the new London Olympics 2012 logo. It is claimed to have cost £400,000. Gosh, that's an awful lot of money! I just wonder whether they have tried a bit too hard and perhaps something simpler and, presumably, cheaper would have been just as effective.

A couple of weeks ago, my wife's car was in for service. Although not part of the service schedule, the dealer normally washes the car - as do many others these days. They failed to do it on this occasion. And they didn't have the car ready when they said they would.

A couple of days later, there is a call from the dealer to ask how she rated their performance. Based on those two relatively minor issues, she only rated them at 3/5.

Last week it was back in for some warranty work. My wife pointed out that she had been disappointed last time by the lack of washing. The guy said he would guarantee that it was done this time. At lunchtime there was a call to say the car was ready, whereas we had been expecting they would want it all day. Guess what - when we arrived it wasn't quite ready because they were still washing it! Sounds like they will do well to get more than 3/5 this time!

So the moral of the story is don't offer what you can't deliver. If a complimentary wash wasn't offered, there would be no customer expectation. If they hadn't rushed to call to say it was ready, they could have had more time without a problem. Some organisations do make life difficult for themselves!

Air travel is coming in for a lot of criticism because of CO2 emissions. Therefore the low-cost airline Flybe is to be congratulated for its decision to provide its customers with data showing fuel use, carbon dioxide emissions and the noise patterns of its planes. Ah, but could there be a clever bit of marketing going on here?

Flybe say that giving passengers more information is meant to help them identify which type of aircraft or which type of route is "the most sensitive to the environment". Guess what? They are investing more than £2bn in 'new state-of-the-art environmentally sensitive aircraft'. Could it be that they are trying to force the hand of other airlines to provide (less favourable) data for their aircraft?

However, the European Low Fares Airline Association has revealed that the average fleet age of its 11 member airlines is now just 3.9 years. So it is unlikely that Flybe will be able to embarrass its main competitors. Especially when Ryanair's fleet is only 2.5 years old.

I think that it is a case of watching developments in this emotive area. I am sure that we will Ramble this way again before too long.

### **30th May 2007 - Places to live, migration, almonds in Spain, rock sensations.**

Vancouver is the world's best place to live, according to a survey by the Economist Intelligence Unit. The EIU ranked 127 cities in terms of personal risk, infrastructure and the availability of goods and services. Vienna, Geneva and Zurich were the top European cities. Hmm, think I'd prefer somewhere warmer personally!

And just to celebrate its top ranking, Vancouver declared last Monday Tom Jones Day - yes that's right, him from the Welsh valleys. Apparently it's a reward for the singer's fundraising for a local charity.

There is much debate at the moment about migrant workers from the eastern countries of the EU. To balance this, as Random Ramblings for 13th December reported, around 5.5 million Britons live permanently abroad, with a further 0.5 million doing so on a temporary basis. In other words, roughly 1 in 10 of us live outside of these shores. Indeed, my own daughter is one such, living and working in Barcelona.

A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that one in four migrants spend no time with British people. Clearly, a language barrier is likely to be a key reason behind this.

Although I have no evidence to support it, my guess would be that a similar percentage of Britons living abroad equally have little or no contact with the local population for the same reason. This is a shame because my experience of France and Spain, albeit limited, shows that the local population are only too willing to be friendly.

For a completely different view on living like a local and of the perils faced by economic migrants, in this case Moroccans, Chris Stewart's *The Almond Blossom Appreciation Society* is to be recommended. This is the third book by the former Genesis drummer on the ups and downs of life in rural southern Spain.

Of course, much of our attitude to immigrants is based on preconceptions. As is our attitude to the elderly. Thank goodness that the law now allows people to work on as long as they want and are able. The latest pop sensations, the Zimmers, prove life can be exciting at any age. I just hope that I can become lead singer in a pop group when I'm 90! The Prince's Trust ([www.princes-trust.org.uk](http://www.princes-trust.org.uk)) has a slogan *Look Beyond The Label*. Of course, this refers to the young people who they are trying to help. But the same should be applied to all people.

### **23rd May 2007 - All is Rose(y) and on the ball at M&S, Wembley snores and Red passion.**

On Tuesday morning Stuart Rose, the head of Marks & Spencer, was on breakfast TV talking about the company's excellent financial results. A viewer had emailed in to say that despite Mr Rose's claim to the contrary, prices were rising. He didn't waffle but came straight out and said quite categorically the lady was wrong. He then went on to invite her to contact him so that he could personally show her round a store and discuss pricing with her.

This was a brilliant piece of PR emphasising his point that M&S take customer feedback very seriously. Well done Mr Rose.

In another PR coup, the England football team are to wear suits made by Marks and Spencer after a contract with the Italian fashion house Armani ended. Apparently it is a three-year deal which will last until the end of the 2010 World Cup. This is yet another example of how the company has used celebrities to advertise their products, an approach that has contributed in no small amount to their turnaround in sales performance and profitability.

Surely there can be few people on the planet who won't have noticed that the new Wembley Stadium was finally ready to host its first FA Cup Final on Saturday. The game between Manchester United and Chelsea was a total bore, such a shame for this special occasion. However, there is an even bigger match happening tonight in Athens, the European Champions League Final between Liverpool and AC Milan.

Few who watched when these two clubs met in the final two years ago will forget Liverpool's unbelievable come-back from 3-0 down at half time, to eventually win on penalties. I think it unlikely in the extreme that we will witness anything quite so epic tonight, but I am equally sure that it will not send us to sleep like last Saturday's game.

There is no doubt that Milan have the stronger side but Liverpool have their unbelievable supporters who will drive them on whatever the state of the game. Liverpool player Luis Garcia sums it up: "We were sitting in the dressing room and we could clearly hear thousands of fans singing *You'll Never Walk Alone*. Can you imagine how that felt? We were 3-0 down in the Champions League final and all we could hear were 45,000 people letting us know they still believed in us. We knew they had endured a long journey and made so many sacrifices to be there. It was at that point we started to believe too."

For me this demonstrates that in all walks of life, the passionate and committed can compete with and defeat the stronger or technically superior.

### **16th May 2007 - For the times they are a-changin'**

It is 43 years since Bob Dylan's title song was released. It followed by a couple of years Pete Seeger's 'Turn! Turn! Turn! (to Everything There Is A Season)'. Well, as I started to draft this Ramble last Thursday, both those song titles came to mind as I watched Tony Blair making the speech in his constituency that finally confirmed that he is standing down as prime minister after ten years.

It is easy to criticise him for much of what has happened in that time, but perhaps an objective assessment might be kinder to him. Whatever your view on his legacy, one of his great abilities is as a communicator. I cannot think of a politician - or anyone else for that matter - in my lifetime who has mastered the art of communication quite like Tony Blair. Sure, there have been people who could make great speeches, whose use of the English language was supreme - Enoch Powell was one - but that isn't quite the same as being a superlative communicator.

I understand from those that have met him, that when he speaks to you he gives you the feeling that you are the only person in the room, even though it may be packed with many others. In other words, he focuses totally on you, even if only for brief few seconds before moving to speak to the next person.

In his speech he talked about his vision back in 1997 that there was a need for change in the country. I am sure that he was right. His government have brought considerable benefits to us but they have also saddled us with health, education and businesses bogged down by targets, policies, procedures and legislation.

President John Kennedy said, "Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or the present are certain to miss the future." It feels like it is time to change again, to build on the economic legacies of the Blair/Brown years and to move to a less centralised, less bureaucratic, less 'nanny state' form of government.

The problem with any change is that it brings uncertainty and disruption. In my days in industry I felt that as soon as we had recovered from one reorganisation the next was being mooted. I am sure that this is not an uncommon feeling. Of course, change for the sake of it is nonsensical. Any proposed change should be analysed very carefully. The real benefits of the change should be established and challenged. The questions 'why?' and 'so what?' are very useful in this situation.

The problem is that most changes stem from the top - no bad thing in itself, that's what leadership is about - but the real reasons, the benefits are not communicated effectively. Sure there is some statement issued that contains management speak, but in my experience, the same words tends to be used whether an organisation is centralising or de-centralising, or whatever else it may be doing.

I mean real words - words that everyone can understand. Of course, understanding will be so much better if the changes have been discussed with everyone beforehand. If everyone has had their input and genuinely feels that their view has been considered.

### **9th May 2007 - French change, Brown control, work and play in France and responding to the customer.**

On several previous occasions this column has commented about the lunacy of French labour laws, especially the 35 hour week, that have made it very difficult for businesses to prosper in France. Indeed, just as many British people have moved to France to retire, so many French businessmen and women have come over here because of our more favourable situation. The newly elected Nicolas Sarkozy has pledged to address the adverse business climate when he takes office.

There are conflicting reports on exactly where Sarkozy stands on the 35 hour week. But as he has called it one of France's most poisonous legacies, its days could be numbered. What is in less doubt is that President Chirac leaves behind him a stagnating economy, unemployment at 9%, and even higher among the young, with some 25% of the under-24s out of work.

Those battling with the restrictions placed on UK organisations: government targets, over zealous application of health and safety legislation, more and more employment legislation - 179 new acts since this government came to power ten years ago - will wonder at the fact that the French come here for a better business environment! And all of us will worry that the famously control-freakish Gordon Brown will saddle us with even more legislation. Apparently Mr Sarkozy wants to reduce the number of French bureaucrats. If only Gordon would follow the same route!

Perhaps in a few years, we will be crossing the channel to work as well as to relax in the sunshine. Regrettably, my own failure to master the language, despite many years of trying, rules out the possibility of working there. So, with a Gallic shrug of the shoulders, I will resign myself just to holidaying in La Belle France!

Talk of holidays reminds me of my few days in Southampton a couple of weeks ago. You may recall in last week's Ramble I commented on the over enthusiastic attention from the waiters in the hotel's restaurant. I wrote to the general manager to compliment him on the overall high standard of service in the hotel but drew his attention to this one particular issue. I had a rapid response thanking me for my comments and confirming that he was addressing the slightly over zealous service with the restaurant manager.

In my experience, good organisations always welcome constructive comments that allow them to respond to the customer's needs. But it is always worth heeding the advice of American businesswoman Mary Kay Ash, "*Sandwich every bit of criticism between two thick layers of praise.*"

Last Saturday morning I walked to the newsagent to buy the Telegraph. For some reason there had been a mistake and a copy hadn't been reserved for me. They only had one left and that was minus the magazine supplement. The newsagent put up his hand and admitted the error and offered to get me a magazine from his other shop. Sure enough, a couple of hours later there was a knock at the front door and there was my magazine. Now that's what I call good customer service.

## **2nd May 2007 - Too much service, junk mail, don't make assumptions, opera fashion show and You'll Never Walk Alone.**

When does customer care cross the boundary between being attentive and being intrusive? I guess that this will depend on the situation and on the individual customer. We have just returned from a few days in Southampton. The level of attention from the waiters in the hotel's restaurant became a little wearing in the end - in fact I felt tempted to fetch the 'Do not disturb' sign from our room and place it on the table! In a restaurant, I do not want to be approached apart from when the food is served, but I do expect the staff to be keeping an eye open so that they notice if I want to call them.

On the other hand the friendly, "You look a little lost, can I help" as I gathered my bearings in a department store is very welcome, even though I didn't really need help. In fact, when shopping, I generally prefer to be left alone to ponder my potential purchases. Having said that, as long as they are not pushy, it can be very helpful to have a knowledgeable sales person provide guidance. Not pushy - that's the key.

There is a difference between being helpful and being pushy or intrusive. If someone is looking lost or clearly searching for help, then that's what they need. But if the person is focussed on what they are looking at or in a deep conversation, they will not welcome an interruption.

Those who inflict junk mail - paper or electronic - upon us obviously don't realise (or care) that they are an irritation. But they should care as an irritated potential customer is unlikely to become an actual customer. And annoy your current customers too much and they will soon become ex-customers. I always advise putting yourself in the place of the customer. Would you want to be bombarded in this way?

Buying original manufacturer's parts is always going to be more expensive than buying 'replacement' parts from alternative suppliers - right? Wrong! A pair of wiper blades for my Honda Accord from a well known accessory supplier costs £23 whereas the original specification parts from Honda costs £19! Lesson for this week - never make assumptions!

I wonder how often we make incorrect assumptions about what something will cost. Is this because we believe that we are being ripped off when we buy from certain sources or is it because of clever marketing campaigns by other suppliers that convince us that they offer the best value on the market?

Last night was very special. We were at Birmingham's wonderful Symphony Hall for a concert by opera superstar Angela Gheorgiu. Stunningly beautiful, the world's finest soprano wore three gorgeous dresses and had two different hairstyles during the evening. What more can you ask? Well, a rendering of *You'll never walk alone* would have been good. Having said that, it is unlikely that Angela could have matched the Anfield faithful in the passion with which it was rendered.

Yes, the best part of the evening was still to come. On arriving home I discovered that Liverpool's European Champions League semi-final with Chelsea was in the final minutes of extra time. Then we went to the dreaded penalty shoot out. But, as manager Rafael Benitez said in response to the claim of Chelsea's manager to be the special one, "*We have our special ones here, they are our fans, who always play with their hearts.*" And didn't they just. With forty odd thousand special ones behind them, the Reds were never going to lose the chance of their seventh European Cup final. Anyone for Athens on May 23rd?

### **25th April 2007 - Toyota makes it to No.1, lean success, how many envelopes?, office flexibility, communicating from middle England and a birthday Ramble.**

Last week's Ramble commented on the state of the US car industry, including the prediction that Toyota would overtake GM as the world's number one vehicle producer. Guess what? This week sales figures have been released for the first three months of 2007 which show that Toyota already have their noses ahead, having sold 2.35 million vehicles compared with GM's 2.26 million.

So how have they achieved it? Answer, through lean manufacturing - working with suppliers and their own employees to develop the most efficient start to finish production pipeline, huge focus on quality and customer care.

Last week I mentioned *The Gorillas Want Bananas*. In this book, Debbie Jenkins and Joe Gregory talk about how they have applied the lessons learned from lean manufacturing to marketing. I thoroughly recommend it to anyone having any responsibility for marketing in their organisation - actually, that should be anyone in the organisation.

How often do we receive two or three communications from the same organisation within a day or so of each other? Like me you probably wonder why they can't get themselves organised to put all in one envelope to save on postage. Generally this is because they work in a compartmentalised way and one department doesn't link up with another. But there might be a sound reason for this apparent inefficiency.

I received an important document recently, but one that I did not think that I would need to act on, so I put it in the 'keep an eye on' file. What I hadn't realised was that there was a second document behind it that did need attention. The sender had obviously assumed that my self-declared status as a nit-picking perfectionist meant that I would check everything carefully - wrong!

So next time you receive two envelopes, it may be because the sender is trying to make the communication process foolproof. A word of warning to them though. Just remember the quote (from an unknown source), "It is impossible to make anything foolproof because fools are so ingenious."!

On Monday evening I was enjoying a meal and glass of lemonade (well, Coke actually) with my friend Jeremy Chapple, the technical director of Abloy Security, part of the group that owns Yale and Chubb locks. Amongst many things, we talked about flexible working. I have taken full advantage of the recent warm weather to work in my 'outer office' on a regular basis. I have a cordless digital phone and, of course, a mobile. All I need now is a wireless laptop to complete my office in the garden. As Catherine Zeta Jones said, "Wireless communications are an integral part of our culture today."

It appears that those working in the City of London can now enjoy the pleasure of outdoor work as 'The Square Mile' has switched on its new wi-fi system. As an alternative, the financial types from the city could whiz up the M1 and M45 motorways and enjoy a quiet drink and a meal in the Dun Cow in Dunchurch and still maintain contact with the outside world via wi-fi. Good to know that communications in the world's financial capital are not far behind a country pub in middle England! I wonder whether Catherine Zeta Jones ever frequents the Dun Cow?

And finally, it is just one year tomorrow since the first Random Ramble appeared. Coincidentally it also happens to be my wife's birthday. I had hoped to celebrate this momentous event (one year of Rambling, not my wife's birthday!) by the launch of the new website, with Random Ramblings becoming an interactive blog. Failure to achieve this is entirely down to me, not the technical department. But hopefully we will get there soon.

For current Random Rambles visit [www.davidwikebizdev.blogspot.com](http://www.davidwikebizdev.blogspot.com)

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