



Series on medical writing: Reaching beyond the obvious

High performance medical writing Step two: People

by Richard Watson

My last article [1] focussed on the need to step out from behind our computers and interact with those around us, but clearly there is more to that simple intent than may initially be thought. Stepping out from behind our computers is the vital first step in engaging our customers and colleagues, but equally critical is the manner in which we conduct ourselves when we emerge. But is choosing the correct approach always as simple as it may seem?

Spanning the murky waters of the River Thames from the buzzing commuter hubs of the south to the financial power houses of the north, London Bridge is an internationally recognised name in the rich architectural heritage of the United Kingdom's capital city. Captured in the reality of history and the fantasy of nursery rhyme, it is a vital link on the route between home and workplace for the countless thousands who stream into the city everyday. It is an essential piece of working architecture: solid, reliable, always there, but, in my opinion at least, also very boring. Amongst London's rich and complex mix of ornate, grand, and sometimes challenging buildings, there is very little about this particular structure that makes it stand above the many other bridges that serve the same purpose across this stretch of river. Its low, sleek design renders it almost invisible against Tower Bridge, its more architecturally intricate and chocolate box adjoining neighbour. Nevertheless, it is there to do a job and it does that job well; in the many years that I regularly crossed that part of the Thames not once did I have to get my feet wet.

Unfortunately, crossing London Bridge is not without hazard because it is both a bridge and a wonderfully effective giant funnel, channelling the stream of commuters from the nearby railway station into two pedestrian walkways on either side of the road. The seemingly endless compression of human beings that it generates forms a wave of life that is powered by a common goal of reaching work on time or securing a rare seat on the 5:35 train to Plumstead. Despite the physical discomfort that this twice daily crush generates, being part of the crowd brings a reassuringly odd sense of purpose and community; security in numbers perhaps. Unfortunately, I was never part of that crowd. It is a two-way crossing and I was always going in the wrong direction.

It's hard to describe how difficult it is to march against the flow of such a crowd. Faith in the warmth of human

kindness would suggest that even the most hardened of commuters would relinquish a small piece of pavement for those heading the other way, maybe even offer a friendly good morning as the fleeting moment is shared. Instead, it is more like encountering the organised ranks of the Roman Army, each pin-stripe clad or high-heeled legionnaire linking into an impenetrable attack formation, all flanks bristling with a vicious array of golf umbrellas that are wielded with a degree of eye-gouging irresponsibility that can bear no defence. The options available to those facing such a situation are limited: give up and go home (not really an option no matter how tempting); stand back and wait for the flow to subside (or, more accurately, stand back and let your life ebb away because the flow of commuters never subsides); put your head down and charge. I do not recommend the third option; it is reckless, foolhardy, and comes with a substantial risk of embarrassment. But I would be lying if I didn't admit that in the pressure of the moment I was that reckless, foolhardy, and frequently embarrassed individual. I would grasp the third option with all the desperation of a man with a train to catch. These were, without doubt, head down and charge situations.

I learned very quickly that this strategy had two serious flaws. Firstly, the collective forces exerted by a crowd moving with a common aim are undoubtedly much greater than the sum that could be exerted by each of the component parts. Secondly, and of equal importance, is the fact that I have never possessed snake hips capable of endlessly weaving through the tiniest of gaps. So the head down and charge strategy was actually the bounce off the first layer and appear very, very silly strategy. Head down and charge was very one-dimensional and prone to failure as a result. I had to vary my approach. Fortunately, the solution was relatively easy, a case of understanding my opponents a little better. Through careful observation, mostly when looking up from the gutter due the failure of the third option, I realised that the oncoming crowd could be placed into three very broad but useful categories. Category One was the hardened commuters, the vast majority who crossed that bridge every day, at exactly the same time, with the same number of footsteps and via a route that was fixed with the precision of satellite location. They knew every inch of the bridge better than the designers themselves and they had adjusted and minimised the path

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How we engage our customers and colleagues is critical.

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they followed with such care and attention that they would rather die than deviate even a millimetre to let someone pass. Category Two was the heavily laden. We've all been part of this group at some point—individuals who have overestimated their capacity to carry extra items on top of their usual burden. Dragging an overweight suitcase or balancing an oddly shaped display stand, these were veritable oases in the commuting desert. The erratic carriage of these virtual weapons under such tightly spaced conditions would create isolated but not insignificant pockets of confusion and space as fellow commuters jostled to escape the inevitable bash on the head from a swinging item. Category Three was the tourists. Tourists have no concept of the rules of commuting. They wander. They dawdle. They stop to look at things and take photographs. And, just like a rock in a fast flowing stream, they create yet more pockets of confusion and space.

It's people, not words, that are at the heart of a medical writer's world.

Armed with this knowledge I somehow made that daily crossing. No longer was brute force and raw courage applied, but a careful, thought out approach based on a swift observation of the advancing crowd. Like a lion seeking the weakest antelope in the herd I would identify the over laden businessman and dart into the space he was creating or weave around the tourists as they froze in a fixed pre-photo pose, graciously accepting every metre or two that was gained. It wasn't direct, it wasn't easy, but some focused consideration of the situation followed by a twist here, a turn there, and a shimmy when required would get me safely to the other side. A basic understanding of the people with whom I was interacting made all the difference.



And there's a lesson for us all in this.

The huge benefits delivered by modern information technology are accompanied by a potential for an intensity, volume, and diversity of daily interactions that is unparalleled in human history. No matter where or how we work, be that as a one person operation or part of a complex multinational team, all of us experience the weight of an oncoming crowd on a regular basis. How often has navigating an avalanche of e-mails felt like an exercise in crowd control? How often have you felt your heart sink when your voicemail indicator is flashing like a disco light on Saturday night? How often does the queue outside your office door or the list of people to meet seem to stretch to the moon and back? In the midst of this pressure how tempting is it to take a deep breath and charge in, hoping with all your might that you'll get to the end of the day in one piece through a combination of luck, momentum, and a tried and tested one-dimensional approach? But is the convenience of such an approach worth the risk of resembling a soulless, rambling, poorly informed and insincere customer helpline during each of these interactions?

Regardless of our level of experience or how much confidence we have in our own ability, we must never forget that we operate on a two-way street, and equal importance must be given to the needs and aims of those with whom we are interacting as to what we intend to get from those exchanges. A one-dimensional strategy can never be acceptable. A clear and structured approach that may be welcomed by an inexperienced colleague or client may be the exact opposite of the collaborative and explorative needs of others. See each and every communication as a unique opportunity. Take whatever time you have to learn, to understand, and offer a genuine interest in the situation at hand. Customise your approach for your customer.

As we open messages, take calls, and shake hands, we need to look beyond the crowd and understand the individual who is capturing this moment of your time: their needs, their styles, their preferences, their motivation. This is crucial in the quality-driven but often subjective or opinion-led arena in which we operate. Only when we achieve this understanding can we hope to offer the level of personal service our customers seek and to deliver documents of the highest possible quality. Believe it or not, it's people, not words, that are at the heart of a medical writer's world. The painstaking care and attention that a writer gives to placing the correct word in the correct place must always be matched by the provision of an equal amount of care and attention to the interactions that surround the writing process.

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Reference:

1. Watson, R. High performance medical writing. Step one: Stop writing immediately. *TWS* 2009; 18(2):102-103.