

Communication breakdown

Shipmasters are inundated with emails from shore every day and it's driving them insane

Michael Grey - Monday 15 August 2011

IT IS a wonderful thing, the facility of communication. For those who recall the sparse radio communications between ship and shore, with the agent's boat the more useful vehicle for transmitting anything other than a few terse coded phrases, that of the present might seem pretty well miraculous.

I have yet to embrace social networking, have yet to tweet, and regard a second longer than necessary in front of a screen as an imposition. I am determined to go to my grave without ever having sent a text message, on the only mobile I have owned, now coming up to its 10th birthday. I must buy it a present.

But I have still managed to fill up my email box with about 375 communications kindly sent to me over the past two weeks, most of which, I can inform you, (if it was you, who sent them) I have dutifully answered.

"I had over 200 emails one day on my last voyage", a master of my acquaintance told me. He commands a modest-sized passenger ship, which probably justified rather more communications than if he had been captain of a coal carrier. He then went to complain quite vociferously about the level of messaging of various types, which flooded into his office all hours of the day and night.

I happened to know that he had first gone to sea in the same trades as myself, which involved long oceanic passages during which time the only communication would be a six-hour weather report, cunningly coded to reduce its costs.

It wasn't as if the master of this ship, all those years ago, would have been bothered by this communication, as there was a radio room, staffed at regular and pre-determined intervals by a radio officer exercising his right thumb and two adjacent fingers on a Morse key.

Today, of course, the poor Old Man, like the rest of us ashore, communicates on his own. Short of tearing the plug out of the bulkhead and throwing the satellite telephone into the sea, there is no way of stopping the perpetual flood of messages pouring through hyperspace en route to the ungrateful recipient.

There are accusations of people ashore using the facility of brilliant and accessible communications to "micro-manage" everything that goes on aboard a ship, driving those aboard insane with endless messages in which there is little either useful or relevant information.

Mind you, after about the first 50 of the day from the charterer's office and the owner, it is probably a relief indeed to pause over an e-advertisement for Ukranian cut-price Viagra, or to sympathise with some poor Nigerian widow wishing to offer you, a total stranger, \$3m.

Communications between those ashore and aboard ship have never been celebrated for their ability to put the recipient at his or her ease. The preface “We fail to understand....” has always engendered a sort of utter hopelessness, if not seething anger.

My late father, a retired naval engineer, made a very good second career advising top executives how to communicate. His prized possession, used for years on his courses as an example of how not to write a letter, was a communication from an oil company marine manager to a tanker master which he described as “the rudest letter I have ever seen”.

Apparently, when he took the manager to task about his style of management, the chap was completely taken aback. “But we always write to our masters like that”, he offered as an excuse.

Modern communications, with the facility of colossal speed, merely makes the rudeness instantaneous. Worse still, according to shipmasters and chief engineers on the receiving end of this flood of management advice, is that it is despatched without the slightest knowledge of the time zone in which the recipient might be, and by people who ought not to be permitted within 50 ft of a keyboard.

Spotty clerks in charterer’s offices, who in another generation would have had to book a call, carefully encode it, reduce the message to its essentials on the orders of a wrathful boss who was trying to minimise costs and then pass it to the aforesaid departmental head to approve before taking it reverently to the Telex Room, now are let loose on the seafaring world unsupervised.

It is not good for seafarers’ morale, especially when all these messages are marked “URGENT” and require an immediate response.

So perhaps we should take a long look at the “official communications” that wing their way from the managers to their ships. The wartime phrase “Is your journey really necessary” could be amended and re-issued. But preferably not by email.

While looking at the whole issue of ship-shore communications, it might also be worth examining the needs of the crew as regards easy, cheap and accessible communications with their families.

There are all manner of exciting technical developments taking place, and as we have pointed out before, the availability of voice and email communications at a reasonable price is regarded as something that seafarers really value. Make it available and you are much more likely to retain those seafarers you hope will not leave you at the end of the trip.

Communication is something that needs rather more thought. Do, please, keep it polite.