

# EXPRESS YOURSELF LIKE THE COMMON PEOPLE

Jane Moore considers how HMRC communicates with its customers

The Irish poet and dramatist WB Yeats said 'Think like a wise man but express yourself like the common people.'

I think this is good advice for any tax expert explaining something to a non-specialist, ie have a good grasp of your subject and then put it across so it is understood. This is an important skill for advisers when explaining tax concepts to clients, but is also something HMRC needs to be good at when communicating with its customers (and I make no apology for using the word 'customer' as I can't think of a better one which included not just taxpayers but also tax credit and other claimants).

I was prompted to think about how HMRC communicates both with individual customers and with the wider world by the PAYE under-/overpayment saga, news of which broke on an unsuspecting world in early September. I don't intend to look at what happened or the workings of the NPS computer – it is covered in Frank Haskew's editorial in October 2010 *TAXline* and in news items on our website. But one point that struck me was that this could have been a Good News story – '4.3 taxpayers to get refunds' – but turned instead into a shock-horror tale of 6m taxpayers paying the wrong tax and HMRC's latest computer being a disaster (as reported by at least some of the press).

The media comments at the time, and the various subsequent TV and radio programmes about the PAYE reconciliation and about HMRC generally, have been very damaging to the department's public image. Much of it could have been avoided if HMRC had thought ahead and used some imagination about how the media and taxpayers might receive this news. Many people assume PAYE gets everything spot-on and HMRC has itself added to this impression by not, until now, doing the regular annual reconciliations which would have got people used to the idea that there could be adjustments. We trust that 'lessons have been learned'.

In terms of information for individual taxpayers, HMRC had prepared some guidance for its website and to

accompany the P800 forms. But this did not explain everything, and charities like the Low Incomes Reform Group brought out their own, more detailed and user-friendly, guidance for unrepresented taxpayers. To its credit, HMRC has since improved the guidance and set up various sources of help for those affected.

HMRC encourages its customers to phone if they need help and information, and here lies another communication problem. As a volunteer for the charity TaxHelp for Older People (TOP) I often see clients who have not understood what they have been told by HMRC on the phone or have been given wrong information. Admittedly I haven't heard the other side of the conversation, but the point is that HMRC has not succeeded in giving the customer the information they need.

Another apposite quotation: George Bernard Shaw said, 'The problem with communication ... is the illusion that it has been accomplished.' HMRC staff need to listen to the question and make sure the caller has understood the answer. That would save a lot of time for everyone, as there would be no need for further calls or letters to HMRC. It is not unusual to find that a TOP client does not actually have a tax problem – the figures are right, but HMRC has not been able to explain them clearly.

Of course, TOP only sees the problems, and there are undoubtedly many cases where HMRC staff do a good job and the customer gets what they need. One thing that would help them do a good job – which emerged in the Tax Faculty's recent member survey on HMRC's service standards – is better training. I have no idea to what extent communication skills are part of staff training, but this is just as important as technical skills.

My final piece of advice is from Joseph Priestley, 'The more elaborate our means of communication, the less we communicate.' So, best to keep it short – and I'll stop there.



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