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Getting the message across

Many of our readers who read the Financial Times every day around the world will enjoy being aggravated by Lucy Kellaway's regular Monday column. The aggravation is usually short-lived as with her wry sense of humour she routinely deconstructs pompous business myths.

On February 4th she decided to have a go at the out-of-office messages made popular by Lotus Notes and now an option for anyone with an email account. In particular she chose to attack a message from an employee at adidas.

"It is hard to know which is worse: the lack of irony, and cloying keenness, the phoniness or the downright irrelevance of the message," wrote Ms Kellaway about this poor employee's message. "Turning a factual piece of information (that this person is not at his desk) into an advertisement for himself and the company is so awful that I fear it will catch on."

So what was this message whose "banality" gave Ms Kellaway her "brief feeling of superiority"?

It went on like this: "Thank you for your e-mail. adidas has a clear vision: passion. And it has a clear mission to be the leading sports brand in the world. In 2005, we will bring this mission to life with numerous exciting product and marketing initiatives. To work on this, I am out of the office until January 26."

What Ms Kellaway does not know is that the first three months of the year anyone involved in the sports and outdoor sector never gets into the office, or the home, or anywhere else much other than the endless run of trade shows that crowd every weekend and most week days. This stream includes the Sports Show, the PGA, SHOT, Outdoor Retailer, WSA, Magic, ispo and the GDS. Time with the family and the regular Saturday

golf game with your buddies is out of the question for from six, eight or even twelve weeks for many staff who spend the time organising the logistics of hotels, travel and laundry as they move between locations – even between continents – and making sure samples and marketing materials are all in the correct place.

Indeed on the very day when Lucy Kellaway was publishing her article and taking the tube home to her family WSA was talking to the adidas staff in Salt Lake City at the Outdoor Retailer Show. Now this show is important. It is growing and on this basis the town has already started to expand the floor space on the strength of a fifteen-year agreement. It is the place to introduce and check out innovations and to get excited. Outdoor is such a wide ranging segment that even if one sector falters another is sure to be growing so we can look forward to the next fifteen years with real anticipation. Increasingly, also, exhibitors are discussing their work with the military, which has increased in both sales and research terms in the light of world events.

The adidas '1' shoe impact sensing technology works like a human reflex nerve. The nerve is a magnetic sensing system which measures compression and therefore the amount of cushioning being used. About 1,000 readings per second are taken and relayed to the shoe's brain, a microprocessor capable of making five million calculations per second.

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A shoe with a little widget

The adidas staff we were talking to were Lawrence Motola and John Whiteman, who had a hand in the design of the amazing new running shoe adidas 1. In the heel of this shoe he has incorporated a little widget which "continuously senses, understands and adapts to provide cushioning for each individual runner's needs". This has built-in intelligence which tells the shoe how to automatically adjust during a run. It does so by sensing the cushioning level using a sensor and a magnet. It then understands whether the cushioning level is too soft or too firm via a small computer. It adapts with a motor-driven cable system to provide the correct cushioning, so all the runner notices is that the shoe feels right during the entire run.

This shoe was featured as the winner of "Best of What's New" Grand Award in the December issue of Popular Science magazine, which pleases adidas as it shows they remain at forefront in sports innovation.

It was interesting, therefore, that adidas Outdoors had come back to Outdoor Retailer after three years with a full product line of clothing and footwear. Motola had a philosophical view about this and the adidas approach. "adidas is not about dominating categories, but about making products which are meaningful."

Part of the objective is to introduce new consumers to the outdoors. There is a large segment which is less active, a group who should participate and for them adidas is a natural.

Many youths used adidas as a sports brand and now as they grow older they can transition with the same brand into the outdoors. "Too many kids sit in front of the TV, and we aim to help to get them outside."

Adidas outdoor is based in Portland Oregon. It is here that the great rebirth of adidas began with Rob Strasser and Peter More over a decade ago. The endemic US sports are also centred in the US while other sports like soccer remain developed in Europe. The adidas innovation team (AIT) of which John Whiteman is a part has a number of global bases.

As well as the magic widget in the adidas 1, adidas has been successful with another special technology loved by the gearheads (Motola is himself a gearhead out of the ski scene) called ground control.

The Ground Control system, which can be seen on the new Tangent XCR shoe, is inspired by the off road technology of motocross. GCS adapts to uneven terrain, dramatically reducing pronation rates and

critical forces on your knees. That means you can watch the trail less and low-hanging branches more.

The Tangent XCR comes with a push-through protection plate on the sole for impact protection, GoreTex XCR and an antimicrobial liner: a lot of technology in a \$125 shoe.

No leather is to be found in this sort of shoe, nor indeed in any of the trail running shoes. "It is easier to control the climate with lightweight breathable meshes. And for running shoes one of the big issues is weight and the meshes are good here. We use XCR and a highly abrasion resistant material on the outside."

There is also a bonding issue in some constructions and with certain material and so while leather can be very breathable and comfortable it does lose out in some categories from both a design and performance perspective. Use of leather depends on end use and it is to be found in the more traditional sports. Hiking is very popular and the traditional hikers are very conservative and still like leather. Leather is also featured in some snow products.

Suppliers getting more adventurous

In general Motola argues that all suppliers are starting to be more adventurous, and tanners are showing some "amazing" products. Adidas works with a limited number of suppliers but have a wealth of new products to look at. "Design can reach into an endless bag of materials."

Shoes like the Anzo with its distressed leather and the Baru feature stylish and colourful leathers, but of course are less for the extreme performance than for

their looks and flexibility. The Baru "takes its wearer to and from outdoor activities", and is comfortable enough for everyday use. And the dry foot version of the Mali in the distressed leather is intended for the coffee shop, rather than great sports arena.

Of course price does come into play; if you want new people entering the outdoors you have decide where you will sell the product and whether the target consumer base has the funds to pay.

Adidas likes its customers to buy in shops where they will get good advice and are pleased with their entry point Jasten shoe at \$90. This still offers great support and stability. According to Motola it is a very successful shoe which can be used to go out for 10k run or even up to a hard 100-mile run.

Motola has no doubt that innovation is the primary driver in this business of the outdoor. "It is vital to create excitement in the marketplace. You need freshness, even just colour helps in this regard."

"Keep the innovation going" are his final words. "Not for the sake of innovation alone. It must be for the end consumer; it must give the user a benefit."

It might be that Lucy Kellaway wants people to stop "straining to sound the part". "Have a coffee and talk like a normal person." Just what happens when an adidas staffer is working a stand at a trade show. Lucy Kellaway, you shouldn't complain about the message. Come and see where adidas are working at the coalface creating the numerous exciting product and marketing initiatives. For a company like adidas you do not want these staff behind any desk, any time. Life is product and the product has to be the best. 



The adidas 'Tangent XCR' trail shoe deploys Ground Control System technology.

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