

**Victor Wants to Know...**

Big Horace is on a contract with Windyside Council. e-Communications Manager no less. Responsibility, warns the Council, customer-focussed partnership. I'm your man, says Horace. Partnership and me, we're good buddies. Fast-track introduction of new methods of customer involvement, advises the Council. No problem, says Horace. Live and breathe customer involvement, he says.

Horace lands the job. Recruits team of e- Communications experts. Wee Eck is e-Research Assistant. Heavy Tam Smith and the lovely Harriet the Horse are e-Commerce Officers. Harriet and Tam slug it out with three bottles of Buckfast inside them. Harriet gets to be Team-Leader, Heavy Tam her bruised Assistant.

First team meeting, Big Horace unveils his vision. "Ask Us Anything!" he says.

Harriet asks: "When do we get a pay-rise?" Wee Eck and Heavy Tam look hopeful.

Big Horace ignores the interruption. "Ask Us Anything! is the brand," he says., "Punters phone us or email us. Walk in even. Ask us anything they like. We give them the answer. It's an emerging communications channel."

Harriet nods. Wee Eck asks if he'll get a Smartphone? Horace gently advises him of the team's budget. Wee Eck rubs his sore nose and manages his expectations.

"The more questions we answer, the more valuable we become," advises Horace. "Targets set. One thousand questions in Month One. Four thousand by end of Month Two. Thereafter five thousand a month. Drops below that, we're out of a job."

Harriet sets Tam to work. Her Aunt Jean has one of they encyclopaedias. Full of facts. Tam just has to make up questions to fit the facts. It does not start well.

"Washington," says Harriet, for example.

Tam looks lost. Harriet sticks his nose in the page of W's. Draws his attention to the entry for Washington. One inch under his left eyeball.

"Capital of the USA," gasps Tam.

Harriet encourages him further with some friendly tugs of his pigtail.

"What's the capital of the USA?" says Tam at last, tears streaming from his eyes.

Harriet nods encouragingly. "Waltzing Matilda," she says at random.

Heavy Tam a bit quicker on his feet this time.

"What's yon famous Australian song?" he asks.

Harriet leaves him to it. Soon Tam has sent in two dozen emails. Tam gets to answer them too. First targets look safe.

The e-Research Assistant is thinking too much.

"Why don't the punters just go down the library?" he asks. "That's where I got my education." Wee Eck tries to look like he got an education. Fails signally.

Big Horace takes him to one side. Need-to-know, for-your-ears-only. "Council's closing the libraries. Budget cuts. Cheaper to employ us."

"But what about all they books?" Wee Eck is astonished.

"Libraries are far more than just books on shelves," says Horace, reading from the Council's Learning Strategy document. "Enough with the questions," says Horace, "get yourself on Google and start your research. We're all Mechanical Turks now, ken?"

On the solid basis of Heavy Tam's work, the numbers start to stack up. There are even some real customer questions coming in.

“Whit ah wid like tae ken is this: when’s the Coouncil gawnty pick up ma bins?” asks one local gentleman persistently.

That’s one for Horace. He reads from the glossies which the Council produced. “The Council is fulfilling all its waste-disposal targets on Scottish Government KPIs,” he replies.

The questioner is not satisfied with that. He’s at the end of a phone, his dog snarling in the background. Large dog, from the sound of it. “Aye right,” he says, “but when’s ma bins gawnty be collected?”

Tricky one. Council policy forbids use of negative words like ‘cutbacks’ or ‘unlikely’. Horace hands the phone to Wee Eck, who does some rapid Googling.

“Tuesday next,” he says confidently. “Ask Us Anything, sir!”

“That’s a’right, then,” says the gentleman, satisfied.

“Good work,” says Horace.

Wee Eck fair enjoys being a Mechanical Turk.

Next day there’s one from the young lad who fills the shelves down at the Square Deal supermarket. He wants to know why he got it in the neck for putting crisp lettuce and fresh broccoli out on the shelves. His boss said there’s plenty of wilting stuff to be sold first. Wee Eck looks up Google. Refers the lad to the local Trading Standards Officer. Manager of the Square Deal comes down the Council offices. Wants to know why the Council is interfering in matters of corporate marketing policy. Big Horace handles this one. All in favour of a healthy diet. Lots of greens. Council encourages five-a-day, naturally. Heavy Tam nods enthusiastically - he is well into his sixth can of lager by then. Big Horace even persuades the manager to put up a £10 grocery voucher, to be given to the one thousandth questioner on Ask Us Anything! Good advertisement, says Big Horace. Customers’ll come flocking. Councillors get to hear of this initiative. Memo comes down to Horace. ‘Supporting local businesses. Keep up the good work!’

Harriet the Horse needs some more fags. Keeps an eye on the counter that Wee Eck has rigged up. 997. 998. 999. Harriet phones in. Voice disguised as old lady. Wants to know if the Council will take her wee dog into care when she’s gone. Wee Eck sheds a tear or two. Assures the old lady that everything will be taken care of. Looks at the counter.

“Crivvens, missus!” he exclaims, “never mind dying: you’ve just won our prize grocery voucher!”

Big Horace sends Harriet the Horse around to the old lady’s address to make a presentation. Heavy Tam goes along with the digital camera to take a few snaps. Once outside, Harriet puts Tam right. They head off to the Square Deal for fags and two cans of export. Collar an old woman with a bag of carrots at the checkout. Take her photo for the Council website. Smiles all round. Square Deal manager will do it again. Monthly voucher. Only the shelf-stacker is no real happy.

In Week Five, the first month’s targets are well exceeded. Cruising to second set of targets. Easy ones coming in mostly.

“When did Hibs last win at Tynecastle?” Wee Eck’s a Jambo: “nivver!” Switchboard jammed with complaints from Hibeers’ fans. Wee Eck forced to check Wikipedia and revise his estimate upwards.

“What is Elvis’ middle name?” “How famous was Susan Boyle?” “What’s an avocado?” “What lives down in the Mariana Trench?” Wee Eck picks up this last one. Makes the mistake of using humour. Bottom-feeders live there, he announces. Suggests the Chair of the Council’s Licensing Committee might be one. Councillor Campbell not amused. Big Horace puts Wee Eck on a written warning.

Then things take a challenging turn.

'Victor' starts emailing.

Victor wants to know how much the Provost paid for his haircuts over the past twelve months. No sign of an answer on Google or Wikipedia, so Wee Eck passes it over to Heavy Tam. Heavy Tam furrows brow. Strokes pigtail for inspiration. Hopeless. Passes it to Harriet the Horse. Harriet squints at it through a haze of smoke, escalates it straight to Big Horace.

"None of your business," replies Big Horace. "Strictly restricted. Next!" He is confident.

"Freedom of Information," writes Victor, straight back. "Twenty working days."

Big Horace goes off to the Accounts Department. Several days pass. Everyone waiting for answer, no more questions being taken.

At last. "Eighty-four pounds. Number 3, short back and sides mostly. One shampoo. Tips excluded."

Normal business resumes, but performance against target is slipping.

Victor comes back on email. Victor wants to know whether the Council plans to issue its leaflets in Romulan. Racial equality, he hints. Freedom of Information, he adds. Big Horace takes this straight to the Policy Team. Largest team in the Council. All manner of hot-shots, go-getters. Policy team debate this for a while. Discussion documents drafted and discussed, presented to full Council. Heavy Tam has seen Star Trek, so he's dead interested. Refuses to generate any more questions until he knows the answer. Harriet comes out in solidarity. Wee Eck sees a new career opening up, teaches himself Romulan from the Internet.

Answer comes back. "In strict adherence to Scottish Government directive EQA/2011176/8 etc, plans are in place to issue all leaflets in Romulan." Big Horace sends this off. Big relief.

Two days later, Victor wants to know whether it is legal for a tenant to be buried in the garden of his council-house. Wee Eck seeks clarification. "Is the tenant already buried?"

Not yet, says Victor.

Wee Eck a stickler for exactness. e-Research. Comes with the territory. "When would you like to do this?" he asks politely.

Soon as possible, advises Victor. Things getting whiffy here.

Big Horace passes this info on to PC Garvald at the police station. PC Garvald looks out at the weather and puts on his cap. But Victor cannot be found.

Victor continues to send in questions. All other work grinds to a halt. No point in doing anything in case Victor comes back with another stonker. Harriet is on five packs of fags a day and humming. Heavy Tam has bitten his nails down to the quick with stress. Wee Eck surfs the Internet, looking for signs of Victor. Google not much help. Showing over a billion hits. Interesting stuff though. Wee Eck loses himself in Google trails.

Then Victor wants to know what Councillor MacPhail was doing under the old railway bridge at 1 a.m. last night. Was his companion, a girl of about sixteen in a tight short skirt, his grand-daughter? Heavy Tam knows the answer to this one straight away. Evening out at the *Splendid Rammy* with Shuggie and Bobs last night. Tam eager to show initiative.

Wee Eck distracted, Harriet dozing, Big Horace doing a management presentation on e-Commerce statistics, with Powerpoint. Lots of graphs.

So Tam emails back. "That wis Stacey Jones. Only fifteen. Mum's waiting for a

council-flat. Councillor MacPhail's chair of the Housing Committee. Ask Us Anything!"  
Twenty minutes later, the Council shuts down the Ask Us Anything campaign and pays off the e-Communications team. Strategic goal met, KPI fulfilled, move on.