



BY ROGER FROST

## Editorial

# Beliefs outweigh facts. And that's a fact – so I believe...

**N**ever let the facts stand in the way of a good headline!

An old joke among journalists, the first time I heard the above doubtful gem of cynicism, it was not meant for my amusement – more as a pointer to preventive action.

“This story you’ve just written...” he began pleasantly enough (“he” being *The Editor!*), “I like the headline: ‘Head denies school drug rumours.’ It’s a real attention-grabber! The problem is that when I read the story... I can’t find any mention of hard facts to substantiate the rumours of there actually being a drug problem at the school.”

“Er...um...well, that’s the point,” I mumbled (“I” being a newly indentured trainee journalist), “there are just rumours and the Head denies them.”

“Bad journalism!” came the judgement. “The headline is effective in capturing the attention of the reader, but if we are serious about our craft, then we need in the body of the story to legitimize its use by demonstrating that there are factual elements to back up the rumours. Otherwise, we are in danger of creating guilt by association – that there is, in fact, something to deny on the grounds that ‘there’s no smoke without fire!’ This is how rumours become beliefs.

“You can use this type of headline to smear anyone. Indeed, unscrupulous journalists do. You’ve no doubt heard of the old joke, ‘Never let the facts stand in the way of a good headline!’ But that’s not how we do things here, is it?”

YESSIR! I MEAN NOSSIR!

## Anything but the facts...

N° 7 of the eight Quality Management Principles on which the ISO 9000:2000 series is based reads as follows: *Factual approach to decision making. Effective decisions are based on the analysis of data and information.*

As a principle, that sounds sound enough. In practice, it seems more often to be the case that decisions are taken on the basis of beliefs – if not prejudices – or hunches (a hunch being a type of belief), or self-interest, or expediency, and then facts are selected to support the decision.

Let’s take a look at some ISO 9000 and ISO 14000-related beliefs (or rumours?) and the facts of the matter. Or should we say, “the facts of the matter”?

**Belief (rumour) n° 1:** *The ISO 9000 phenomenon is running out of steam.*

Just about every year for the last four or five, someone has passed on to me the rumour that ISO 9000 is on its last legs. Well, we all know people who, if you remark on the fine weather, respond: "Sure! But it won't last – it's going to rain!" They're right, of course. Sooner or later, it will rain. Just as sooner or later, ISO 9000 will have served its purpose and be replaced by, or evolve into, something else – but not yet.

Whether or not one believes that ISO 9000 certification is a good thing, it is an indication as to the degree of use of the standard – and the fact is that ISO 9000 certification continues to rise. According to *The ISO Survey*, the number of certificates worldwide grew in 2001 to 510 616, an increase of 101 985 certificates (+ 24,96 %), the highest growth recorded in all 11 cycles of the survey carried out since January 1993. To persist in the face of such data in announcing the demise of ISO 9000 is a good example of the strength of belief – if not something else – over fact.

**Belief (rumour) n° 2:** *ISO 14001 is not taking off.*

Compared to what? The number of entries to the latest episode of *Star Wars* or *The Lord of the Rings*? The latest single by a singer like Britney Spears may be dead if it does not hit the charts within days of its release, but shouldn't other measures be applied to the process of seeding an environmental management system, encouraging it to take root and produce the fruit of this investment of human and financial resources?

A more appropriate comparison would be with ISO 9000.

The first *ISO Survey* in January 1993 showed a world total of 27 816 ISO 9000 certificates more than five years after the launch of the series. In comparison, at the end of 2001, five years after the launch of ISO 14001, the worldwide total of certificates of conformity to that standard was 36 765, nearly 10 000 higher than its quality management predecessor after a comparable period on the market.

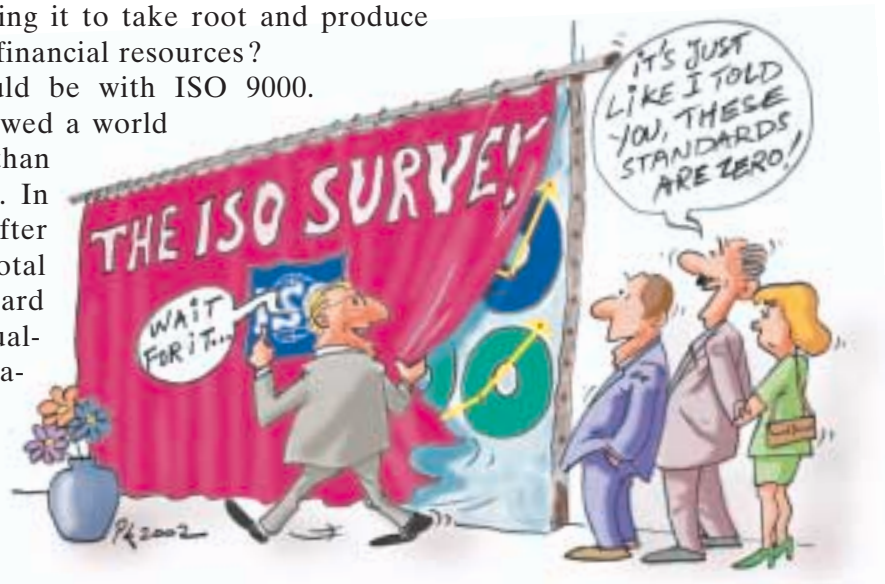
But it's true – that's peanuts compared to the spread of Play Station 2.

**Belief (rumour) n° 3:** *ISO 9001:2000 is meeting market resistance.*

Interestingly, the very sector which depends on certification for its business survival has contributed to creating this belief/rumour. Since the beginning of the year, several conformity assessment bodies have emitted panic signals over the allegedly slow transition by industry from ISO 9001/2/3:1994 to ISO 9001:2000 and where this leaves the 15 December 2003 deadline when certificates to the 1994 versions will lose their accredited status.

Interpreting a slow rate of transition (if, indeed it is slow, because this again begs the question – slow in comparison to what?) as a negative reaction to ISO 9001:2000 once more shows the power of belief to influence perception of the facts. Another interpretation is possible. If you fix a three-year deadline for transition, aren't many companies going to wait until the deadline is breathing down their necks? How many people do you know who keep deadlines, let alone improve on them?

But what are the facts? For these, it was necessary to wait for the publication of the 11<sup>th</sup> cycle of *The ISO Survey* in June 2002. This showed that in 2001, 44 388 of the total of 101 985 ISO 9000 certificates issued that year were to the newly published standard. This represents 8,7 % of the total of valid ISO 9000 certificates worldwide. Is this a poor performance? Eight



point seven per cent might not seem like a high figure, but one needs to remember that the worldwide total has taken 14 years, since publication of the ISO 9000 series in 1987, to build up. In 2001, ISO 9001:2000 accounted for 43,53 % of ISO 9000 certificates issued in its first year on the market. Isn't this a good performance? Is the glass half empty, or half full? In both cases, our beliefs are likely to influence interpretation of the factual data.

### Sticky things, beliefs!

When one quality professional learned of the principal findings of *The ISO Survey*, he commented: "If one believes that happiness is more ISO 9000 certificates, there is no question that this is great news. There were a lot of dire predictions that with the new standard going on line, there would be a major slow down in certification in 2001. However, those who are opposed to ISO 9000, whether it is the 1994 or 2000 versions, will probably now interpret the growth as being due to the fact be that most people tried very hard to get their certificate for the 1994 edition before pressures for the transition became too much."

He neatly put the finger on another facet of beliefs. When a strongly held belief is challenged by the facts, we can always modify interpretation of the facts so that the basic belief remains intact.

There's a story about a patient who suffered from the delusion that he was dead. His psychiatrist tried some brief therapy: "Since you're dead, then you won't mind me pricking your thumb with this pin?"

"Go ahead!"

The psychiatrist did so and then pointed to the tiny bead of blood drawn by the pinprick.

"Well, would you believe it?" the patient exclaimed. "I never knew the dead could bleed!"

*Never let a cold, hard fact disturb a cosy, warm belief!*

