

Tips for Overcoming Language Barriers in Customer Service



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It's Not that Funny

One of the popular comedic bits you will often see today is one that makes fun of the language barriers that are often encountered in the modern world, especially in the area of customer service functions. With globalization and the modern economics of communications many companies have turned to outsourcing the customer service function to a foreign vendor. This has not always been well-planned or effective. While it may be less expensive to turn to a foreign source for customer service, such factors should never dilute the very purpose of having customer service in the first place.

Over the past decade the major users of customer service call centers have come to appreciate that compromises in the quality of these functions is simply not acceptable to most customers. Particularly in this age of pervasive use of social media, customer expectations are that they have an efficient and interactive ability to communicate easily with everyone with whom they do business. To avoid being the butt of unwanted jokes, the language barrier must be dealt with by companies that provide and use these call centers.

What we will share here are some practical and valuable tips for providing a level of customer service that exhibits the quality and responsiveness that customers want, even when using an outsourced service where the native language may not be English. Before addressing those tips, however, it is worth spending a few moments addressing the issue of customer service. These basics are, in fact, a part of training in many call centers, here and abroad.

People that deal with customers and answer the phone, regardless of their facility with a language, must understand the probable reasons someone is calling, what they are expecting, and how to properly deal with them.

Understanding the Elements of Excellent Customer Service

If discussing a philosophy of customer service, one will note the specific selection of the modifier in the header of this section. It is up to a company to determine the level of service it seeks to provide its clients and customers. Consider for a moment your reaction to some alternative modifiers:

- Adequate customer service
- Acceptable customer service
- Good customer service
- Superior customer service
- Unequaled customer service

The reality is that each possible attitude to the customer service level a company may choose to provide drives many aspects of the business process, from positioning to marketing to economics. A company simply can't boast about its customer service unless it makes a major investment of time and resources to deliver what it promises. However, the first thing to recognize about any investment in this capability is that the proper level of customer service pays dividends and is not simply a sunken cost.

Of course, the qualifier of "proper level" is the key to the entire issue. Each company must determine the proper level of service for its business model and market niche. Practically speaking, some businesses do not have to offer all that others do. While every business thrives and succeeds on satisfied customers, the question centers on the individual customer's expectations for the product or service segment concerned.

Everybody in our consumer economy is a customer of many businesses every day. Those in the business of delivering customer service can gain valuable insights into translating their own experiences into this reality. Whether having to tolerate dealing with "voice mail jail" is acceptable, such as when calling a city department, or totally unacceptable, such as needing immediate help for a computer problem, is driven by custom and expectations. While in reality that voice mail experience may be frustrating, it isn't going to cost the water department any customers.

The Basic Elements of All Customer Service

The truth is that even for the government service there are basic components that should always be present when dealing with customers, especially customers with a problem or complaint. While these are mostly driven by common sense, they are worth reviewing:

- The right perspective. Referencing the earlier comments, it is a simple fact of management that the ability to project the right attitude to customers begins with management communicating that attitude to the representatives that interact with those customers. If management truly sees customer service as a hassle and a necessary evil, they can't expect their people to project a professional, sincere and committed set of values when dealing with customers. As usual, it starts at the top.

- Easy access to the right person and area. For all the blessings of technology, the referenced voice mail jail where numerous prompts are required and seldom end up at right point is simply not acceptable in today's business environment. Attempting to lodge a complaint or ask a question should not be the equivalent of engaging in a holy quest.

- Quality communications skills. Even before addressing the issue of language, there are basic skills that drive any productive customer communication. While email and live chat on the Internet make this somewhat less important than previously, these concepts apply across all communications.

- o Greeting. The only thing worse than no answer is an answer asking you to hold with no input sought or response given. This followed by a long wait will escalate any customer's level of irritation and frustration.

- o Listening. Let the customer speak and listen closely to discern the real purpose of the call.

- o Hearing. Repeat what you hear and ensure that there is a clear communication of the details of the situation.

- o Responding. While not every situation can be resolved to a level of total satisfaction, the representative either helps move to a positive solution or adds fuel to the fire by the quality of their response.

- **Clear Guidelines and Empowerment.** Customers call or email wanting results: They do not want to be told that the representative needs to consult with a manager or have someone get back to them. To the degree possible, every common problem needs to be discussed, analyzed and planned for. The frontline representatives must have tools to solve common problems and empowered to utilize those tools. A financial assessment can be made ahead of time and that analysis to determine the most cost-effective solutions. These are then provided to the representatives. Escalation may be the answer but it should be a rare option.
- **Training.** Perhaps the most common sense element, too many companies think it is acceptable to throw new customer representatives into the process and learn by on-the-job training. This attitude never produces the desired results. It is ineffective for the customer, demoralizing to employees and ineffective for the company. There are many elements to effective training and several of them are referenced in these tips.
- **Measure and Monitor.** Largely due to the Internet and the real-time metrics it allows, more companies are understanding and using the power of detailed feedback on processes and operations. While there is value to subjective and anecdotal feedback concerning customer satisfaction, it is important to carefully scrutinize the hard data related to customer calls, complaints resolved, costs incurred, and the numerous other data points that come from the process. Just one example illustrates the potential payback. If a new product release results in an unusual level of calls about one function or problem, this can be used to quickly address an issue that may reside on the factory floor.

Understanding Communications, Culture and Language

While the points made thus far are essentially generic and applicable to all languages and cultures, this overall discussion pertains primarily to those for whom English is the native language. Americans are notorious on the global scene for having primarily one language and little training in others. Lacking this dimension of insight, it is easy to think of language barriers simply as one of accents. That is, of course, a totally invalid assumption.

Customer service professionals understand that the very manner in which words are used is important. The entire attitude projected by a representative is often as important to problem resolution as the words themselves. With that understanding as a foundation, it is worth noting that words themselves are mere symbols for use in communicating in any language. Mere translation is often insufficient to fully communicate what is intended and the symbols they represent.

Different cultures react to situations differently. Some feel it is totally acceptable to vent strong feelings and others take great offense at many unintended verbal slights. When outsourcing customer services functions, the responsible person in a company must take steps to ensure that the vendor they choose is concerned about more than the mere translation of words. The representatives must be able to decode the emotions and issues behind a customer's words and respond in a manner that is consistent with normal customer expectations.

Dealing with cultural norms and standards, using the right tones and inflection, and listening carefully are all issues that are compounded when there is any barrier tied to language. This often requires the employees of an outsourced customer service vendor to show proficiency in these areas through role playing and training evaluations. Again, if this dimension is left to on-the-job training, there will be many unsatisfied customers as a result.

While it is again common sense, never forget that poor customer service can cost a company far more than the original issue that caused the communication from the customer.

There is one additional point concerning the English as a primary language environment. Those in the business of customer service know that English does not represent a monolithic cultural mindset. Use sir or ma'am with southern U.S. customers and you are seen as polite. Use the same term with some New Yorkers and they may take offense at an implied elderly status. This point simply emphasizes the importance of the basics being in place and shared by all involved before dealing with the many additional issues involved in effective communications.

Practical Tips to Overcoming Language Barriers in Customer Service Environments

With the above overview, some reassurance can be gained by understanding that there are a number of basic and straightforward tips that can aid in overcoming some of the challenges and barriers that result from communicating in different languages, particularly in fulfilling the customer service function.

Approach these tips by reminding yourself that communication is not merely about translation or accents. It deals with the method and form of speaking and how the very manner of speaking affects the process. With that said, consider how the below points can be applied to your particular situation and use them to evaluate the staff of any potential outsource or foreign vendor seeking your business:

- Provide proper and adequate training. Throughout these tips there is a constant reference to the need for adequate training. Even when there is no language barrier, the process of providing excellent customer service is both an art and a science that takes time and training to do well. It can't be overemphasized or repeated too often that trained and experienced representatives are at the root of any successful process of customer support and service, regardless of the languages involved.
- Give and take the time to speak clearly and at the right speed. In any language, enunciation is essential. Most people tend to get a bit relaxed with their pronunciation and allow shortcuts to affect the clarity of their speech. That isn't a problem around family and friends but can be a major stumbling block to comprehension when the other party is expecting formal speech at a reasonable rate. This issue is compounded when someone is calling a party that is trying to understand in a second language. The representatives can aid the situation by listening very carefully and using the very best headsets and audio connections. When responding, a careful but not artificial rate of speech will decrease the effect of any heavy accents. However, there is no real replacement for clear enunciation on both sides.
- Encourage patience, expect impatience. It is not so much an issue of fairness as reality. Customers that have an issue or problem have already had their patience tested. If a call to the company does not go as desired, the impatience will often be brought on quickly. On the other hand, the trained representative must exhibit an extreme patience with the customer, allow them to vent, and then move on to resolving the issue at hand.

- Be willing to seek clarification. A disgruntled customer will be irritated if they have to continually repeat themselves. On the other hand, the irritation will be greater if the representative is not able to respond to the issue in a precise manner. It is essential that the individual hearing the problem clearly understand what the customer is saying so that a proper response and solution can be provided. If in doubt, they should be taught to seek clarification in the most efficient manner possible.
- Avoid jargon and idioms. These are areas of translation that frequently create problems between cultures and languages. Americans love sports analogies and metaphors. An example is “being in the red zone” for indicating a critical phase of completion and “going postal or going ballistic” for someone losing control. Any vendor that is using customer service representatives from a non-American culture must include in their training a discussion of those common phrases, including those most common in dealing with customer service issues, such as “striking out”, “two strikes”, etc. It goes without saying that any abbreviations, special terms and acronyms directly related to a customer’s business need to be a part of the vocabulary of the representative. Some of the early experiences with outsourced customer service in the computer industry were less than favorable because the customers were not familiar enough with basic computer technology, which added to the language and communications problems.
- Restate and rephrase to verify understanding. Once again, this is an area that is a bit of a balancing act. However, different from the issue of seeking clarity, this skill and practice can be used effectively without creating frustration. Repeating what one believes is being said is accepted by most people as a reasonable step if the motive is verifying information and not simply overcoming a problem caused by language issues. Representatives should be trained to restate things not as a question so much as a verification process. This will generate confidence that the conversation is achieving the customer’s objective.
- Develop the right vocabulary. Beyond dealing with the issues of jargon and idioms, a successful outsourcing vendor will train representatives in a broad range of basic business terminology. They should understand the terms a customer might use, from unhappy to lawsuit. Customers are accustomed to many support calls being something of a game-playing scenario. Therefore, it takes some skill to look beyond the actual words to what the customer is seeking. This speaks again to the issue of mere literal translation being just the starting point of effective communication when separate languages are involved.

- Encourage the use of basic emotions. Sharing emotions is an important part of normal communications, even over the telephone. Just look to the widespread use of emoticons in social media for an example of this reality. One difficulty that many people have when dealing with outsourced customer service is the flatness of responses from the representatives. People want to sense a level of empathy and understanding that comes only with a discernible level of emotions. The ability to use emotions in the customer service cycle is a very important skill for representatives to possess and apply.
- Use multiple means of communication. It is normal to think of most customer issues dealing with language to be telephone-based communications. As noted, email and live chat are growing in importance in the role of dealing with customer service. Language remains an issue but is more controllable in a written environment. At least a portion of any company's customer service needs can be fulfilled with these non-verbal means of communicating with customers. An additional advantage is the use of templates and pre-formatted responses that can be utilized with these written channels of communicating.
- Use all the technology that is available. The rapid and substantial advances in speech technology make it possible to translate verbal communications quickly. In many situations, this translation by computer can aid a representative in grasping the customer's comments. Likewise, templates and pre-formatted responses can be quickly retrieved with a few verbal keywords. Representatives must avoid sounding like they are delivering canned responses. At the same time, these tools can be a significant aid if used correctly.
- Have a defined escalation process. There are, of course, situations where a problem simply can't be resolved by a representative on a first call, even when that representative is empowered with a number of options. It is a necessary part of the service process to identify when a customer must receive advanced attention and help. Representatives should be trained to watch for the signs of such a situation and be ready to use the escalation process when it is deemed necessary. It is worth noting that some customers simply demand to "speak to a manager" and will accept nothing less. It is never acceptable to tell such customers that they are out of luck and there is no such option available to them. Surprisingly, however, there are companies that put both customers and representatives in such a situation. If a proper transfer of a call is appropriate, the process should be quick and efficient with the caller not required to start all over with their reason for calling.

The Future of Outsourced Customer Service

The issue of personalized and quality customer response is seen as a significant competitive issue by most businesses today. There are even firms that advertise the fact that customers will always get to talk to a live person when they call, and some infer that their representatives speak native English. Companies will continue to test different scenarios to find the right balance for the level of service their customers expect.

The global economy and advancing technologies mean that the language issue will be dealt with and outsourced customer service will remain the choice for many companies. The issue of language will continue to become less of a barrier.

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