

How to become a confident global communicator by Sonya Maybury – June 2011

English is the accepted language of commerce today, but doing business with people who speak it as a second language provides many communication challenges. Paying attention to *what* you say as well as *how* you say it can minimise misunderstandings and win contracts. Here are some guidelines:

Slow your speech pace

Deliberately aim to speak at a slower pace than usual – especially if the information you are conveying is complex or technical. A rate between 150 and 170 words per minute should be satisfactory. This allows your listeners time to go through their own ‘translation’ process.

Aim for clarity

Speaking clearly means pronouncing words properly – not skipping syllables or running them together. Speakers of English as a second language may expect a formal style of pronunciation. Consequently, if you refer to ‘the Australian Government’ don’t say ‘the ’stralian gov’men’t’. And don’t be tempted to say ‘liddle’ for ‘little’ because ‘ds’ are easier to pronounce than ‘ts’.

Word endings need special attention as well. For example: **forty** should be distinct from **fourteen** while **thirty** should not be confused with **thirteen**. To make it clearer for your listeners, quote numbers in words *and* figures, so that ‘forty’ is reinforced as ‘four zero’ and ‘fourteen’ as ‘one four’. Use this method for addresses, dates, money values, quantities, etc. Make use of the twenty-four hour clock to avoid any confusion over the time of a meeting, flight or appointment.

Use the International Call Sign Alphabet

The English language has a number of letters which sound alike if you spell them out. For example: Bee, Cee, Dee, Gee, Tee, Vee. To avoid potential problems, airlines, police and emergency services use the International Call Sign Alphabet which has a distinct word for each letter of the alphabet. If you’re a fan of *The Bill* you’ll know it’s as easy as: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie.

Choose simple, specific words

Aim to use common words which your listeners are likely to understand. English offers lots of synonyms, so choose the simpler ones. For example: ‘try’ is better than ‘endeavour’, ‘help’ is preferable to ‘assist’ and ‘stop’ wins out over ‘discontinue’.

Saying to someone you will ‘get in touch’ is too vague. Be specific. Tell them you will contact them by telephone, fax or email. Better still, say *when* you will do so.

Censor your sentences

Short sentences work best. Stick to one main idea per sentence. Keep the sentence structure simple. Avoid using complicated sentences which consist of a statement followed by a question or vice versa. For example: ‘You can hear me, can’t you?’ or ‘You can’t hear me, can you?’ Both examples would be very confusing for the listener. So make it simple. Just say: ‘Can you hear me?’ The answer now is a clear ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

Take responsibility for delivering a clear message

If you ask your listeners if they are understanding your message, you may appear to be questioning their knowledge of English. Demonstrate your responsibility for communicating effectively, by posing questions such as: ‘Am I explaining that clearly?’ or ‘Did I cover everything?’

Cut down on contractions

In Australia we generally reduce business titles to their initials only, e.g. CEO, MD, CFO. Make it clear to your overseas listeners which company official you are referring to by using the full title: Chief Executive Officer. If you want to use initials, explain them first. In written communication it is common practice to write a title out in full followed by the initials in brackets.

Contracting the names of companies can be risky, too. Your listeners in China probably will not know that Woolworths is commonly referred to as Woolies, that McDonald’s is called Maccers in Australia or that DJs is short for David Jones.

Curb the clichés

Clichés and idiomatic expressions are, ‘at this point in time’, ‘alive and well’ in Australian speech. But, ‘at the end of the day’, it is only native English speakers who really know what they mean. Why? Because most clichés don’t stand up to a literal translation. If we say something ‘cost an arm and a leg’ we know this is an idiomatic way of saying something was very expensive. Of course, some sayings are understood worldwide such as the expression: ‘to lose face’. But do Asian people know the expression: ‘to put a brave face on it?’ Maybe not.

So if you refer to a ‘window of opportunity’ or say that your product is ‘going gangbusters’ you may thoroughly confuse your audience. Keep the colourful clichés for the times you are sure they will be understood.

Good global communicating!