## Language skills

## Does your service language meet customers' needs? A lexicon can help

**Most companies invest a lot more time on the language and word choices in their marketing materials than they do in their everyday conversations with customers. And that's a mistake, says Micah Solomon, author of *Ignore Your Customers (And They'll Go Away).***

It's a mistake because customers don't usually get their make-or-break impressions of your product or your company from your advertising. They get them primarily from day-to-day conversations with your company and specifically with your reps. "And those are the impressions they spread to others," Solomon says.

Appropriate service language will help enhance the customer's experience with your company's product or service. Attention to language and word choice will help prevent reps and other service employees from using language that unintentionally alienates or offends customers. And says Solomon, "When you have a service failure, the right words can be your best ally."

### Establish a speech and style handbook

While you may be hiring the right people and training them effectively to provide the service you want to deliver, unless you tell them otherwise, "they'll still speak with customers much the way they speak in their own homes," he says.

For example, your rep might be the nicest person in the world, but she might not know that saying, "You owe us $300" is probably not the best way to construct that message. More polite and less potentially offensive language might

be: "Our records show a balance of $300." That allows for the possibility that your records might be wrong or that the customer is unaware of the balance.

To avoid common language mistakes, Solomon recommends that companies put together a guide similar to the one the Ritz-Carlton hotel created for its hospitality employees. It built a set of "ideal phrases" for use in conversations with customers, and trained employees to use those phrases. And because the Ritz-Carlton brand was high-end, it encouraged employees to avoid language such as "sure," "no problem," "folks," and "hey," and to replace them with phrases like "my pleasure," "right away," and "certainly, sir."

### Scripts or no scripts — that is the question

You might think that with all of the attention that Micah Solomon wants customer service managers to pay to language, he might prefer to script customer interactions as much as possible. But that wouldn't entirely be the case.

"There might be some situations where a very detailed script might be appropriate, but, in general, I would start by hiring the right people and giving them a lot of training on what language is appropriate and what is not," Solomon says.

Instead of an overall script, he adds, "you might put together a summary of best practices for most of the customer situations that come up. Newer employees would be helped by that. And your best employees would know when to throw that summary out the window."

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While you don't have to imitate the Ritz-Carlton's style, Solomon says, you can still study the language that works best with your own customers, identify harmful phrases that should be avoided, as well as positive phrases that should be encouraged. Summarize these for your employees in a brief lexicon or language handbook that they can keep readily available. "In the lexicon, you will spell out which words and phrases are best to use and which to avoid in various common situations," he says.

And once you get past eliminating the offensive words and offensive phrasing that could hurt people's feelings, then you can look for the language that is going to align with your brand and the brand experience that you want for customers.

### Getting reps to buy in

Getting reps and other employees to buy in to your language lexicon is important, Solomon says, because even over the phone customers will be able to detect a lack of sincerity. But it shouldn't take a major training effort.

"You need to explain to people the reasoning behind it," says Solomon. "So you should explain that, yes, your job is answering the phones and handling customer calls, for instance, but your purpose beyond that is to maximize customer delight by making every incoming call as pleasant as it can be for the customer. And that's why we want to pay attention to the language we use with customers."

Then, Solomon says, "after explaining the reason, you need to explain the method — and the method is to use these phrases, and not these phrases."

In fact, he says, reps probably recognize as well as anyone the type of language and phrasing that is going to be offensive or off-putting to customers. And for positive language that aligns with your company's brand, you might ask them to review your company's advertising or its website to develop suggestions.

"Involving reps in the discussion will be very valuable in terms of getting their buy-in to the program and reinforcing their use of the lexicon," Solomon says. ■

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