

Making Yourself Understood by Everyone— Seven Keys to Global Communication

By Judith Filek—President
Impact Communications, Inc.

It's important to talk to people in their own language. If you do it, well, they'll say, "God, he said exactly what I was thinking." When they begin to respect you, they'll follow you to the death.

—Lee Iococca

Strategic messages are important to any company. Key initiatives have to be implemented. The challenge facing global corporations today is making these messages understood by all. There are seven keys to making cross-cultural communication successful.

- 1. Recognize that differences exist.** It is easy to assume that because people are all part of one organization, their way of doing business is the same as in the parent company. Acknowledging that cultural differences exist is an important first step and so is a basic understanding of how the country as a whole conducts business. For example, if there are divisions of a US company in Shanghai and Beijing, it is important to know the typical styles for communicating, negotiating, entertaining and greeting. Do they bow or do they shake hands? What is their orientation towards time? How do they make decisions? What is their value system that affects their business practices?
- 2. Demonstrate curiosity.** Read about the history and culture of the country. Ask questions. Learn simple phrases for hello, good-bye and thank-you. The fact that a colleague in another country is interested in learning about their customs, religious beliefs and holidays goes a long way to cementing relationships and making the other person feel a part of a team. If it is possible, make on-site visits and participate in local events or happenings.
- 3. Error on the part of being overly courteous.** It is easy for a person from another country to be judgmental and to think their way is best. One-child-only families, arranged marriages or fines for gum chewing while odd to you, may make perfect sense to the nationals. Consequently, it is a good idea to avoid conversations about politics, social and religious customs. Also, it is a good idea to avoid humorous asides since people may feel uncomfortable because they don't understand your comment.

Being courteous also means being open to local foods and food preparations. For example, in Korea, foods are prepared with kimchi, a pickled cabbage. Some foods are boiled in a hot pot. In Japan, all parts of the animal are eaten, and the eyes of the fish are offered to the most senior person. It would be offensive to show displeasure with the local customs.
- 4. Keep it simple.** It is difficult to know just how well people understand English, so it is best to keep communications, whether written or verbal, simple. Define all acronyms and abbreviations. Be consistent in word choices. Make sure sentences are short and uncomplicated. Avoid sport references. Make technical ideas explainable by using simple charts and graphs. Any visuals should be directed to the host audience -the more pictorial, the better.
- 5. Be warm and friendly.** Greet people appropriately and use their names. Give the appropriate eye contact and, by all means, smile. A smile crosses all barriers and endears you to your host. Be aware of customs for gift giving. Upon your return home, send a hand written note thanking your hosts for their hospitality.

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6. **Speak slowly and pause often.** Whether you are speaking face-to-face or on the phone, allow people time to process the information by speaking slowly and pausing often.
7. **Get help.** If people clearly have limited language ability, provide help. Use a translator or another employee with strong English skills. Ask people frequent questions to see what they comprehend. Consider providing on-site English classes for business professionals.

Cross cultural communication can be challenging, as well as tiring. Any small misstep can be disastrous. Without the ability to communicate globally, business professionals will miss opportunities to grow their business and deepen relationships. But as Lee Iococca mentioned, if you do a good job of communicating, people anywhere will follow you to the death.

Impact Communications, Inc. consults with individuals and businesses to improve their face-to-face and over the phone communication skills. When you have to have impact, phone (847) 438-4480 or visit our web site, www.ImpactCommunicationsInc.com.