WATCH YOUR MOUTH: LANGUAGE AND CUSTOMER SERVICE

> If you employ workers whose first language isn’t English, you may have come to regard these individuals as your organization’s greatest resources. They are hard working, appreciative and utterly reliable. Unfortunately, these same workers may also be your organization’s greatest vulnerability. Employees whose English isn’t proficient may be unintentionally straining relationships with your customers. Simply put, if customers can’t easily understand your employees, they will take their business elsewhere: to a place where they won’t have to work so hard to spend their money.

That’s why when organizations bring me in to do customer service training seminars for their team members, we occasionally need to address some of the language issues. Here are some tips you can pass along to your team members.

Don’t Stop Improving
As a foreign-born person now working in Canada or the USA, you may have experienced some local customers being impatient or rude. You might possibly interpret this as bigotry or racism, when in most cases it isn’t. More likely, if your English skills (or in Quebec, your French language skills) aren’t proficient, then chances are, that’s the main reason customers are being less than friendly. So, let’s talk about English language skills.

The fact that your employer hired you indicates that you already have a basic understanding of the English language. However, a basic understanding is only the beginning. You need to know the language well enough to clearly understand requests from customers, co-workers and supervisors. And you need to speak English fluently enough to be easily understood by others.

When it comes to improving your English, you’ll get the fastest results by enrolling in courses for English as a second language (ESL). These programs are widely available through community colleges and other providers. As for the cost, it is money well spent. By improving your English as quickly as possible, you make yourself available for jobs that involve greater interactions with customers. These are the kinds of jobs that typically bring in more income. In other words, you are not saving yourself or your family any money whatsoever by choosing not to invest in language lessons. To get the greatest return on that investment, you’ll also need to practice.

When to Speak English
No matter how many courses you take, your English will not improve unless you actually practice speaking it. The perfect place to do this is at work. Even if your workplace has lots of people who speak the same language other than English, take the opportunity to practice speaking English.

What’s not appropriate is speaking your first language with a co-worker, then suddenly becoming silent when a customer approaches. That can be perceived as rude. It makes customers feel like they are not welcome, as though they are invading a private party. As LL Bean said, “Customers are not interruptions to your work; they are the purpose of your work.” To avoid creating these ill feelings, make it a habit to speak English: a) during your working hours and b) in any location where customers have access. If you are on a break and in a location that’s designated for “employees only,” then you might choose to speak your first language with a coworker. Keep in mind though, that the more you practice speaking English — even during breaks — the easier it becomes. Plus, you and your coworkers can help each other improve.

Your Golden Opportunity
Bottom line — your job is more than just a wage; it’s an opportunity. It’s an opportunity to help yourself and your family. It’s an opportunity to build community. And, it’s an opportunity to master a new set of skills. One way to make the most of this opportunity is to focus on practicing and improving your English. Good luck!

Jeff Mowatt is a customer service strategist and certified professional speaker based in Calgary, Canada (he has been working on improving his French for decades). To order a copy of his book “Influence with Ease” or to inquire about engaging Jeff for your team, visit www.jeffmowatt.com or call toll free 1-800-JMowatt (566-9288).

ESL RESOURCES

Looking for more information about English as a second language education for specific programs in your area? Here are some resources to get you started.

- Office of English Language Acquisition resources
  http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oella/techassst.html
- Education association look-up (enter “English”)
  http://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/Programs/EROD/
- National Center for Education Statistics
  Search for Schools, Colleges and Libraries (both public and private)
  http://nces.ed.gov/globallocator/
- National Center for Education Statistics
  College Navigator
  http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/
- National Center for Education Statistics
  Private School Search
  http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/privateschoolsearch/