

Grow your business

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Be A Better Communicator

What is communication? The dictionary definition is usually something like: “*The exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, as by speech, signals, writing, or behavior*”, but it could also be characterized as “*Something most of us could be a lot better at doing*”.

Effective communication is essential to business success. Whether it's writing a letter to introduce yourself to a prospect or briefing your sales team, you need to communicate clearly to get your points across and motivate others.

For most of us there is some room for improvement in our communication skills. Here are some pointers that can help in the different areas we might be called upon to use in business.

Speaking without fear

It's interesting how most of us dread speaking in front of an audience and yet manage to speak with one or two people very easily. The secret to overcoming this reluctance is to *be prepared* – work out in advance what you want to say and rehearse it until it sounds natural to you.

Always keep your audience in mind. They not only listen to what you say but how you say it, and your tone of voice and body language can be telling quite a different story to your words. There's a lot more to oral communication than *just* words. Practice speaking clearly and let your emotions enter into what you're saying. Emphasize important points with gestures and vocal inflections. This keeps your speech from becoming a dull monologue in which the highlights are buried.

Think about what you're going to say *before* you say it. If you have an important meeting coming up then be sure you're up to speed on the topic being discussed. This will give you confidence as well as making what you say more interesting.

Avoid jargon and using complicated words or sentence structures to impress others. Just speak naturally and don't rush what you say. Always maintain eye contact with your audience – regardless of whether it's one person or an auditorium full of people. You can learn a lot about how you speak by talking to yourself in front of a

mirror. It's the fastest way to find out whether you're the kind of person you'd like to have a conversation with.

Get it right when writing

Writing is a lot like speaking. The purpose is the same – to communicate a message to other people. Although it's not done face-to-face many of the same principles apply. You still need to organize your thoughts and put them down in such a way that readers can understand what you're telling them.

Every piece of written communication deserves the same degree of consideration whether it's an email, a brief note or a whole volume. Write to your audience in terms they'll understand, and don't use terminology that might confuse them.

Everyone seems to be time poor these days so get to the point as quickly as possible. You can outline the points you want to get across at the beginning of the communication, and then follow up with supporting facts and details.

One all too frequent aspect of modern communications is the number of errors in spelling they contain. Since most of what you write is done on a word processor, learn how to use the spell check function and use it on everything you write. But even then, be aware

that it won't pick up everything, so you should still review your text carefully one more time after the spell check.

Just as with your oral presentations, avoid using jargon and complicated words or sentence structures. Write naturally and without pretension. Business communications are especially dependent on clarity of the message rather than the style it is couched in.

Take Some 'Fat' Off Your Business

Businesses are a bit like people. When they get older they tend to put on weight. This weight usually comes from a lack of exercise – the exercise of reviewing business operations for those pockets of 'fat' that inevitably build up.

Most SMEs are focused on increasing their sales, and there's nothing wrong with that. But another way to improve the bottom line is to cut expenses, and there's always a way to do that in even the best run enterprise.

Look before you buy

Start by taking a look at everything you purchase, from stationery to electricity and from restroom soap to insurance. Whoever first said "*It pays to shop around*" summed up one of life's biggest truths.

Review your existing loans. If your terms are higher than the prevailing market rates you might consider refinancing with a new lender. If you're about to borrow money, look around and don't just automatically go back to your present or recent source of funds. Read up on current interest rate movements and you can really save big money over time.

The same thing goes for your corporate credit cards. Those bits of plastic are always afflicted with premium interest rates and there's plenty of room for you to shave a percentage point or two with a bit of competitive shopping around.

Make it a team sport

Trimming the fat can become a goal for your team. Make it a challenge for them to beat the price for everything you're now purchasing. Assign different items to every team member and let them go to work.

First, be sure to give them the ground rules: every new product in the comparison must be equal to or better than the one you're now purchasing. Price isn't everything, but you'll be surprised how easy it is to match the quality of most goods while reducing the price you pay. It's a highly competitive world out there.

If you're purchasing a group of items from a single supplier, stationery being a good example, the job's a bit tougher because it involves comparing a large number of items. Nominate a selection of items on which the

comparisons will be made. If you find a likely candidate to replace your existing supplier then mention that the word 'discount' just might encourage you to change to them.

Overheads, like rent, can also be varied by negotiation. First you have to become well aware of conditions in the marketplace and identify a few similar facilities that could be yours for a reduced rental outlay.

Take these back to the owner (or the owner's agent) and let them know that you've found better terms elsewhere that would be a better proposition for you. Even if you're not yet at the point of negotiating for a new lease you could well find this prompts an offer for better terms from your current lessor – maybe even one that includes your current as well as longer term arrangement.

Thin down your inventory

While you're at it, take a look at your inventory. Remember that products just sitting there waiting to be sold are costing you money. If you've been using long production runs to minimize downtime you may find on analysis that you're paying too much for the privilege.

Also look carefully at your communications. The Internet and cellular phones play a big part in modern business – and can cost your company a lot more than they have to. Regularly review your suppliers and don't sign any long term contracts (more than twelve months) unless you're absolutely convinced you can't do a better deal next year.

Once you start trimming the excess fat you'll find it's a game that it pays to play. Make this corporate 'dieting' a regular part of your operations and you'll be leaner in no time.

Seven Quick Ways To Stimulate Sales

Some ideas for stimulating sales have become marketing classics. They aren't expensive, nor are they complicated, but they'll work for almost any business and can be implemented with little more than your customer list, a bit of word processing and a good quality printer plus some envelopes and postage.

These certainly aren't new ideas, but they've been road tested in countless applications and have proved to have lasting appeal.

The gift voucher

The aim of this strategy is to add to your customer base by getting existing customers to introduce new ones to your business. It's especially useful in the lead up to a gift giving time such as Christmas.

Offer existing customers the chance to buy a gift voucher at a discounted rate. For

example, 'Give your friends a \$50 gift voucher for Christmas – yours for just \$40'. Yes, it does mean giving a bigger discount than usual, but it also means that new customers who get the vouchers come into your business and are likely to purchase more than the value of their gift voucher when they're there.

The market research survey

You can never know too much about your customers, so work up a questionnaire that will give you information you can use for future marketing. Ask them to provide details that will help you fulfill their needs more effectively. This will provide useful information in itself, but to encourage their response and maybe make some sales, send it out to your customer base with an accompanying certificate, product list and a discount offer. Everyone completing the questionnaire and returning it with an order will receive a discount (the value on the certificate) off the usual price of the products ordered.

The '10% off everything' sale

This is another very simple way to stimulate sales. Offer your customers a flat percentage discount on everything they buy for a limited time only. Make it a condition of the offer that they bring the communications piece with them when they make their purchase – the ad from a paper or your direct mail piece or whatever. Don't promote the discount at the point of sale; this is a restricted offer and you want it to be seen that way.

The package deal

This is a simple one. Take product A and product B and offer them together for a price that's less than if the two were purchased

separately. The real genius comes in when you're selecting the products. If you have a slow mover, combine it with something that's 'hot' and offer the two as a package deal. Promote it by stressing the savings. It's even better if the two are in some way related – a pen and box of fancy paper, for example. Give it a name like 'Our Desktop Special' and get it out there.

The bonus offer

'Buy product A and get product B free!' Package an expensive item with a bonus lower priced item and promote them for the usual price of the expensive item. This is another good way to get rid of slow moving or superseded items. Once again, look for a relationship between the two products and try to find a catchy name for the bonus deal.

The 'out of hours' sale

'By Invitation Only' reads the promotional piece, and it's announcing a sale for regular customers only, outside of normal trading hours. If you deal in seasonal stock this is a good way to move it out at the end of the season. You can offer a flat discount on everything, plus a special discount on 'selected' items that you're especially anxious to move.

Advise customers on how to use your products

Many products have more than one use. Kleenex tissues can be found in almost every home today and they're the first thing you think of when you have a head cold. But they were first marketed only as a way to remove makeup. It wasn't until a market research survey found that people were buying them to blow their noses into that manufacturer

How To Make The Most Of Your Newsletter

Be sure to read each article with the mindset "How could this apply to our business?" Thinking of it that way will guarantee that you get value. Better yet, take notes as you read and commit to having the ideas implemented by the time the next edition arrives. Also, make copies for each team member.

To really make sure something positive happens, work with your business development specialist to talk your team through the ideas and how to set a schedule for getting them implemented. We're here to help you get started.

Memorable Quotation

"If you are patient in one moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow."

Chinese Proverb

An Important Message

While every effort has been made to provide valuable, useful information in this publication, this firm and any related suppliers or associated companies accept no responsibility or any form of liability from reliance upon or use of its contents. Any suggestions should be considered carefully within your own particular circumstances, as they are intended as general information only.

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Kimberly-Clark woke up to how they should really be promoted.

Whenever you market the products you sell, be sure to tell prospects about all the ways they can be used. There are over 2,000 uses for WD-40, for example. Do a bit of investigation into the products you are marketing and you could find that sales can be increased simply by telling customers about all the possible ways to use them. It's a great idea for point of sale promotions.

When Customers Get Angry

The 'customer from hell' is something most service team have experienced at one time or another. They're red faced and angry, and refuse to accept anything other than a 100% capitulation by the party they perceive as guilty.

Untrained and unprepared sales team members can become catalysts that intensify the customer's already considerable ire and take the state of affairs past the point of reconciliation. What usually happens is that the salesperson feels like he or she is under personal attack and wants to either fight back or run away – the last thing they want to do is take the blame for someone else's failure.

If the customer leaves the place of business without having resolved their issue they will do all they can to tell the world, or at least all of their acquaintances, their side of the experience. They'll write letters to the newspapers and in the worst case scenario wind up on TV sharing their tale of woe with the station's current affairs team.

Angry customers are a fact of life and any business that hasn't developed a strategy to handle them is simply waiting for the time bomb to explode. Thankfully, there are ways to deal with this kind of customer that will defuse the situation and pave the way for customer retention instead of alienation. Imagine that you're the person confronted by a 'customer from hell'. Here's what you do:

1. Start by deciding within yourself that you will stay calm and find a solution. That way, at least one of you isn't emotional and both of you are working for the same end.
2. Put yourself on the customer's side of the fence. Something has

made them angry. Try to see the problem from their perspective and communicate to them that you're seriously concerned about their being upset.

3. This does not mean immediately admitting that the business has made an error; once you do that there's no recovery from a losing position. But do say something like *"I know you're very concerned about this and I'll do all I can to help you"*.
4. Get the full story. What actually happened? Your questions will show you're sincerely interested in getting to the bottom of the problem so make sure you get the complete picture. Be careful to avoid any impression that you're 'interrogating' them though, or trying to find fault with them.
5. Check the details with the customer by repeating the situation as you understand it and get their final agreement that the facts are correct. Make notes if you think the situation is serious enough to warrant it.
6. Consider all the information in light of the business' policies, any warranties or guarantees that may apply, and prevailing consumer legislation. Most of all think of what it will take to make this customer happy with the business again.
7. Propose your solution to the customer and gain their acceptance. It might not happen right away, so keep working until it does. Be sure that you have reached an agreement by asking: *"Will that be acceptable to you?"*
8. Implement the solution as soon as possible. If there will be any delay, set a date by which it should be finalized and make sure it is.

You can now see why it's a good tactic to empower your customer service people with the ability to resolve such issues by themselves. Nothing's worse than making the customer wait for 'the manager' to arrive. Wherever sensible make it possible for the salesperson to also be able to deal with customer complaints. It's also good practice to build into your complaint resolution system a follow up with the customer a few days later as a goodwill gesture. This will be a reminder that you value their patronage and a reassurance that you're looking forward to seeing them again.