

## ***Insights for Executives***

### **Leading Flawless Multi-lingual Communications**

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The essential objective of every corporate communications initiative is to convey the message in a manner that is unambiguous, persuasive, and memorable. Working in our mother tongue we have an array of tools at our disposal: the words themselves, the associations they carry, the way they sound, the way we follow, exploit, or ignore grammar, and more, all help us achieve our objective. We take these things for granted – they are part of our common culture – and when we endeavor to communicate across the boundaries of language and national culture they can lead us badly astray. Worst of all, we may not even realize there is a problem.

#### **Why multi-lingual communication is so difficult.**

Even between countries that speak the same language, miscommunication abounds. “Two people, separated by a common language” – a comment on British-American relations attributed to both Winston Churchill and George Bernard Shaw -- speaks volumes about the enduring challenge in international communications - culture, more than language, divides us. Language reflects the culture, but it is the culture of a society -- the shared set of assumptions and beliefs about the right way of doing things that defines and channels how events and actions are perceived and how words are used and understood.

There are many famous examples of communications disasters arising from cultural differences. Some are laughable; some have caused outrage, like the baby food with a plump baby on the label introduced in a region where the custom was to show on the label a picture of what the jar contained. Other missteps in international communications may be more subtle but still weaken the impact of your message.

Communicating across the boundaries of culture and language requires a different mind set. Concepts and their logical development take precedence over form of expression, be it theatrical or subtle. Achieving the true expression of a complex idea in a second language is not a solitary endeavor – it requires dialogue and debate between native speakers of both languages to get the meaning exactly right.

#### **Write it right the first time.**

The first and most essential step in executing flawless multi-lingual communications is to Write It Right the First Time. Successfully communicating your message across multiple languages means writing text that can be accurately and unambiguously translated rather than aiming for maximum impact in the base language. Writing for translation requires more thought and effort than simply following an accepted style guide (such as

AP Style for US English), although that is a great way to start. Here are some simple but important rules:

- Write in the active voice.
- Rely on nouns and verbs to carry your meaning and keep adjectives and adverbs in purely supporting roles.
- Keep sentence structures simple.
- Accept a higher than normal level of redundancy, particularly in compound and parallel sentences.
- Avoid all forms of obfuscation; misdirection never translates.
- Avoid jargon, idiom, slang, euphemisms, and newly fabricated words.
- When in doubt, follow George Orwell's advice to "never use a long word where a short one will do."

You may not win any literary awards this way, but you will have taken the first step in ensuring that your message will travel across cultural and language barriers and be understood in the way you intended. Writing it right the first time will avoid many problems with routine matters, but communicating more complex or controversial material successfully requires additional work.

### **Understanding feedback: solving the dilemma of the bell-shaped curve of criticism.**

My first experience with the bell-shaped curve of criticism came while I was running North American internal communications for a US company. We operated worldwide and so when we were acquired by an Italian company our management was able to understand and adjust without undue confusion. One day thousands of bound copies of a case study of our acquisition arrived unannounced. Two hundred-plus pages long, the book had been written by the folks at headquarters and was intended for our dealers and leading US business schools. The English translation was uneven, ranging from awkward to laughable to sexist and offensive. Local US management quickly pronounced the book to be both inspirational and insightful, and so informed headquarters. Managers who might come in contact with headquarters received a copy of the book; all the rest went to storage.

That's how the bell-shaped curve of criticism works in a one-way communications structure: if the field perceives that the communication is official, the field's response to an unacceptable translation will be indistinguishable from the response to a superb one. Critical feedback from the field will be forthcoming only if the translation is nearly right, and then will only detail specific technical matters such as misspellings, awkward phrasing, inappropriate synonyms, etc.

In this particular case the company was very lucky -- the book had not been translated into other languages, the new owners were too far away and too busy with other things to follow-up, and so the book never saw the light of day.

That was a lesson I never forgot: operating a multilingual communications structure is profoundly different from communicating within a single culture. Certainly the Italian executives who wrote the book did not intend to offend or to look silly. Later, when I could read the original Italian I discovered that parts of the book were quite insightful, but the translation was painfully literal – English words embedded in Italian grammar and cultural nuance. They had done their very best, but they had done it all themselves – no native English speaker had been involved.

### **The phrase you never want to hear: “If only they had asked us....”**

The last thing your colleagues on the other side of the pond or the other side of the world want is a poor translation into their mother tongue. They want to be proud of their company. They want to bask in the respect and admiration of their neighbors. They will gladly join with you should you decide to *Share the Responsibility* for flawless multilingual communications with them.

Communicating across multiple languages succeeds when it is a cooperative endeavor. Translation is not cryptography; the more complex the concepts the greater the gulf between two languages and the more thought and effort required to achieve the equivalent meaning and impact in the translation.

Sharing the responsibility means building a partnership based on mutual understanding and respect. Local management understands what is to be communicated and why it is important. You understand local considerations that are critical to getting your meaning across. Local management respects the integrity of the message. You respect the cultural realities of the market.

Sharing responsibility does not mean sending out a draft and asking colleagues for their “input.” Cultures around the world differ in the importance they attach to understanding the rationale and the logic of a plan before folks can dive into the details or critique a draft. Making certain the “why” and “how” of a communications plan are understood first will result in a superior communiqué.

With the logic understood, your colleagues can help expand and refine the key messages. By the time you get around to discussing the draft, the logic will be understood and accepted, the key messages clearly defined and agreed. The discussion of draft documents can then consider how best to use familiar local styles to achieve the desired understanding on the part of the recipients. Short-cut the first two steps and, in many cultures, your colleagues will simply be unable to help you, no matter how much they might want to.

The last place you want to start this process is with a critical message - start with a message having a moderate level of risk. Risk forces participants to take positions and opens the door for real understanding. No risk means no learning. After a couple of successes try delegating planning and coordination for issues with only regional impact to an experienced local team. For example, a corporate restructuring might impact just three European Union countries. You could appoint the most respected of the country communications directors to lead the process, with yourself as a key participant. Should

a crisis arise down the road, the skills, trust-levels, and mutual understanding necessary to work collaboratively under pressure will be broadly established.

## **Practical steps that will make it easier to Communicate Concepts across multiple cultures and languages.**

Get out of your office. Go there. Bring the entire local communications team into the meetings. Become accustomed to meetings held in more than one language; the best ideas may come from those who are uncomfortable expressing themselves in your language. Get to know your colleagues face-to-face, try to understand their culture. Let them get to know you, what you are trying to achieve, and what you expect. In many cultures achieving a certain level of personal rapport is essential before candid dialogue can begin.

Disperse your corporate communications staff. Select as your second-in-command an individual who holds a different passport, is fluent in the company's official language, and whose language skills complement yours. Base the individual outside your company's home market, in one of your most important markets. Meet when you can, speak by phone every day. It is vastly easier to work closely with people of your own nationality, but you won't learn a thing that way.

Learn to survive in other languages. Guiding your company's communications process does not require fluency in the major languages spoken by your customers. But it is critical that you have a basic understanding of how significant the differences are between your own mother tongue and the other key languages important to your company. If you are not fluent in a second language, learning to survive in at least one language you don't speak is an efficient way to gain some insight into such differences. If you can, on your own, without resorting to your mother tongue, and with appropriate local courtesy: clear customs, rent a car, navigate, check into your hotel, order a meal, leave a wake-up call, and, have a fair idea what people are talking about in the local language 20% of the time, you will be well on your way to appreciating the challenges in communicating ideas and concepts across languages and cultures.

Create your own Rosetta Stone. For each major language spoken by your customer base, work with your local in-country management to build a dictionary of terms, both technical and non-technical, that are used in your industry and your company. Why? Because most translators are generalists, good translators work quickly, and few will be conversant with your industry's jargon. A customer that knows to provide a specialized dictionary earns the gratitude, respect, and full attention of the translator. And both accuracy and consistency will benefit.

Build a frame around the message by creating and sharing the communications plan, including: objectives, key messages, timetable, persons involved, individual responsibilities, and the base documents. Do a bilingual plan for each major market and share it with all key people involved both at headquarters and in-country. Invite comments, questions, and suggestions on the package from all recipients. This is, bar none, the most useful tool in building and maintaining a shared sense of ownership for flawless multilingual communication!

**Follow up.** Reverse translate final documents (preferably before release) via an outside source. Assess all coverage and published accounts for message accuracy. Depending on the story, the country, and your industry that may mean only the wire services or it may include national newspapers, radio, TV, and blogs.

### **The bottom line.**

Flawless multi-lingual communication can be achieved but it requires a different mind set. Concepts and their logical development take precedence over form of expression. Moreover, achieving the true expression of a complex idea in a second language is not a solitary endeavor – it requires dialogue and debate between native speakers of both languages to get the meaning exactly right.

True, writing for translation and supporting a collaborative communications process is more work than just sending stuff out, but having all your management and communications folks in key markets truly aligned with your core message ensures maximum accuracy and impact while spreading your follow-on work across a huge base of personnel with high local credibility. And don't forget: cleaning up after a botched communication would be far more work and far less rewarding.