Language Engineering

Every. Word. Counts.

Your company has probably given more thought to the language it uses in marketing campaigns than to the words employees use when having conversations face-to-face with customers. That's a mistake, because customers don't generally get their make-or-break impressions of your company from high-minded branding exercises. They get them primarily from *day-to-day conversations with you*. And those are the impressions they spread to others.

Language underlies all other components of customer satisfaction. For example:

► A perfect product won't be *experienced* as perfect unless you also use the right language in describing it to customers.

► Even your most well-intentioned and technically flawless employees can alienate customers if they use the wrong language.

► When you have a service failure, the right words can be your best ally.

If you haven't given much thought to selecting and controlling your company language—what your staff, signage, emails, voicemails,

and web-based autoresponders should say, and should *never* say, to customers—it's time to do it now.

Establish a Consistent Style of Speech

No brand is complete until a brand-appropriate style of speaking with customers is in place at all levels of the enterprise. You should therefore work to achieve a consistent style of service speech.

A distinctive and consistent companywide style of service speech won't happen on its own. You'll need social engineering: that is, systematic training of employees. Imagine, for example, that you've selected ten promising salespeople for your new high-end jewelry boutique. You've provided them with uniforms and stylish haircuts and encouraged them to become your own brand's versions of a Mr. or Ms. Cartier, starting on opening day. But they'll still speak with customers much the way they speak in their own homes: that is, until you've trained them in a different language style.

Happily, "engineering" a company-wide style of speech can be a positive, collaborative experience. If you approach this correctly, you won't need to put a gag on anybody or twist any arms. Once everybody in an organization understands the reasons for language guidelines, it becomes a challenge, not a hindrance. The improved customer reactions and collaborative pride of mission are rewarding. As a consequence, our clients have found it to be a pretty easy sell companywide.

Here's how to make it happen.

Create a Lexicon of Preferred Language and Phrasing

To help launch their Ritz-Carlton luxury hotel brand, initially, founding President and Chief Operating Officer Horst Schulze and his team decided on a set of ideal phrases for use in conversation with customers, then trained employees to use those phrases. The frequent use of certain phrases helped unify their employees around a shared identity and contributed to a distinctive "Ritz style" that the public could easily recog-

nize: phrases like ''My pleasure,'' ''Right away,'' ''Certainly,'' and—a personal favorite—''We're fully committed tonight.'' (Translation: ''We're booked solid, bub!'') The list of words and phrases to be avoided included *folks*, *hey*, *you guys*, and *okay*.

(It's easy in the 21st century to miss the conscious choices behind this, because a Ritz-style vocabulary now pervades the hospitality industry. This occurred for a few different reasons: through imitation by competitors, because it entered the public consciousness when the late William Safire and others in the mainstream press covered the phenomenon, and because Ritz-Carlton alumni have dispersed to other companies, carrying their Ritz language with them consciously or as second nature.)

We recommend you take an approach similar to The Ritz's, although not necessarily with their same English Country Manor overtones. Study the language that works best with your own customers, and identify harmful phrases that should be avoided. Codify this for your employees in a brief lexicon or language handbook that can be learned and referred to on the job. In the lexicon, you'll spell out which words and phrases are best to use and which should be avoided in various common situations.

Putting together a language handbook is a relatively simple undertaking. It doesn't require an English degree. But it does require forethought, experimentation, and some pondering about human nature. Here, for example, are some good/bad language choices Micah uses in the manual he developed for use in his business ventures (see Appendix for more examples and scenarios from his company Oasis):

Bad: ''You owe . . .''
Good: ''Our records show a balance of . . .''

Bad: ''You need to . . .'' *(This makes some customers think: ''I don't* **need** *to do jack, buddy—I'm your customer!'')*
Good: ''We find it usually works best when . . .''

Bad: "Please hold."
Good: "May I briefly place you on hold?" *(and then actually* **listen** *to the caller's answer)*

Good lexicons will vary depending on industry, clientele, and loca-tion. A cheerful "No worries!" sounds fine coming from the clerk at a Bose audio store in Portland (an informal business in an informal town) but bizarre if spoken by the concierge at the Four Seasons in Milan.

Choose Language to Put Customers at Ease, Not to Dominate Them

No matter what your business is, make it your mission to avoid recom-mending any condescending or coercive language in your lexicon. Sometimes this kind of language is obvious, but sometimes it's quite subtle. Here are examples:

Subtly insulting: In an informal business, if a customer asks, "How are you?" the response, "I'm well," is grammatically correct—but may not be the best choice. Hearing this very "correct" response may make your customers momentarily self-conscious about their own potentially imperfect grammar. It may be better to have your employees choose from more familiar alternatives like, "I'm doing great!" or "Super!" (Most important, of course, is to follow up with an inquiry about the customer's *own* well-being: "And how are **you**, this morning?")

Unsubtly coercive: We're not likely to forget the famous steakhouse that trained staff to ask as they seated us, "Which bottled water will you be enjoying with us this evening, still, or sparkling?" We took that phras-ing to mean we weren't permitted to ask for tap water.

(In this situation, one that comes up in nearly every restaurant, what *is* a better choice of words? How about: "Would you prefer ice water or bottled water with your meal?" Or, considering that this question

offers an early chance for the waitstaff to build rapport with guests, add some local flavor. In Chicago, a friend's restaurant a few years back was asking, "Will you be having bottled water or Mayor Daley's finest aqua with your meal?")

We believe a Ritz-Carlton style "Say *This* While Avoiding *This*" language guide optimizes customer satisfaction in most businesses and helps bind staff members into a team. But if it strikes you as too prescriptive (or too much work) to develop scripted phrases and specific word choices for your employees, at least consider developing a brief "Negative Lexicon." A Negative Lexicon is just a list of crucial *Thou Shalt Nots*.

We call the Negative Lexicon the Danny Meyer approach, after the teachings of the New York restaurateur and master of hospitality. Meyer feels uncomfortable giving his staff a list of what *to* say, but he doesn't hesitate to specifically *ban* phrases that grate on his ears ("Are we still working on the lamb?")[1]

A Negative Lexicon can be kept short, sweet, and easy to learn. Of course, new problematic words and phrases are sure to crop up as time moves on. Ideally, you'll update your Negative Lexicon as frequently as *Wired* magazine updates its "Jargon Watch" column.

Concentrate Your Language Efforts on the Key Customer Moments: Hellos, Good-Byes, and the Times When Things Fall Apart

Concentrate your language efforts on the most vivid, emotionally crucial points in your conversations with customers. Social psychologists, notably Elizabeth Loftus, have proven that human memory radically simplifies our emotional experiences when it files them away for storage; our minds normally retain only the most vivid aspects from each situation, letting go of whatever else might have occurred.[2]

So focus your language efforts on moments that are known to remain vivid in memory: hellos (make yours unusually warm and per-

sonal), good–byes (make them wonderful), and recoveries after service failures (yours should be more graceful than anybody else's).

It's Not You. It's Them, *Plus* Their Background, *Plus* You

Psychologists find that two people listening to the exact same conversation can come away with completely different impressions of the people involved. You've probably noticed something like this in your workplace: You think your colleague Jim seems friendly and kind; Margaret thinks he's a suckup.

Why does this happen? *Cultural differences* are a big part of the story. Culture is the set of assumptions, traditions, and values a community develops over time. Thus, members of a culture other than yours may interpret your behavior in ways that haven't occurred to you, because of their community's own assumptions, traditions, or values. Cultural differences can create particularly bad impressions when you interact with a customer from a different part of the world—or even a subculture within your own country. To manage this risk, we recommend becoming expert on cultures your company serves and expert at cross-cultural communication in general. There are some superb books that can guide you, such as Brooks Peterson's *Cultural Intelligence: A Guide to Working with People from Other Cultures (*Intercultural Press, 2004).

A caution: Be sure to apply your new expertise *flexibly.* Individuals don't always subscribe to their culture's assumptions, norms, or values: Personality or family background can be a more powerful determinant of an individual's values. Over and over, you hear us recommend that you think about your customers as individuals rather than as groups. This core principle applies to cross-cultural communication, too.

Shut Up Sometimes: The Artie Bucco Principle

The tragicomic character on *The Sopranos*, Artie Bucco, starts the series as a successful restaurateur. Slowly, though, things begin to fall apart for him. Finally, his wife, Charmaine, has the painful job of telling him what is going so wrong: that his customers come to the restaurant to be with each other, not with him. Their special moments are for them, not for him, and interrupting them with what *he* thinks is important is driving them away. Artie never does get the message when he interacts with customers. If he had learned to listen between the lines, he could have picked it up, as his wife did.

She was listening.

Align your organization to the value of listening. Learn to adjust the flow of your comments to match each customer's interests and mood.

And practice shutting up sometimes.

Words Have Their Limits

Visual and physical cues can speak louder than words. Make sure your words aren't being contradicted by nonverbal messages, such as:

- ▶ Employees who say ''Welcome'' while their body language telegraphs ''*Go away!*''

- ▶ First-point-of-contact employees whose chairs are oriented so their backs face arriving guests, or who, although oriented correctly, are so ''efficiently'' engaged in computer tasks that they may as well not be placed at a greeting location at all.

- ▶ An office building with obstructed ramps or heavy, hard-to-open doors. (What does that ''say'' to a customer who is in a wheelchair, has arthritis, or is pushing a stroller?)

- ▶ Small items kept under lock and key in a way that silently insults your customers: for example, a corkscrew that is locked down with a security chain to prevent its theft—at a four star hotel?!

It's true—when travelling, we recently encountered a corkscrew tethered to a bicycle-style metal security chain atop the minibar in a very upscale hotel room. *(See the gory visuals at* www.micahsolomon .com.*)* Make sure you're not similarly insinuating that your customers aren't trustworthy. If you are, it'll be hard to ask for *their* trust and loyalty in return.

Show, Don't Tell (And Don't Ever Just Point)

Don't give customers verbal directions. Getting directions in words is confusing and hard to remember. It unsettles people. When a customer asks how to get somewhere, physically lead him there.

The private jet-setters who stay in Leonardo's ultraluxury Capella resorts require a restroom as often as the rest of us. So, says Leonardo, "We don't tell them 'Go down the hall, turn right, walk fifteen feet, and then turn left.' We walk with them until the last turn. Then we back away, for discretion." Or, as the Capella service standard spells it out: "Escort guests until they feel comfortable with the directions or make visual contact with their destination."

This dictum has spread to other top service establishments. According to Phoebe Damrosch, formerly of Thomas Keller's four-star restaurant *Per Se,* Rule #20 in Keller's guidelines is "When asked, guide guests to the bathroom instead of pointing." (Phoebe also mentions a side effect we ourselves haven't experienced: Some of the male diners, she says, seemed confused, perhaps mistakenly thinking that she planned to accompany them in and help. "The eighteen percent you will leave me, sir, I always wanted to say, would not cover that."[3])

Phone and Internet Language and Communication Pointers

▶ **Here's our advice about screening your calls: *Don't do it***. Just don't! And do your best not to have anybody, anywhere in your business, screen calls.

This is perhaps our most wildly unpopular idea. When clients first hear it, they usually tell us we're crazy. (You hate it too, right?) But our experience demonstrates that this single change can greatly enhance customer satisfaction—and as a fringe benefit, organizational effectiveness.

What's wrong with screening? There is no faster way to alienate potential customers (and business allies) than to make them run a gauntlet before you'll speak with them. If someone wants to talk with you, *let him*. If you're not the right person, you can quickly and politely transfer his call onward. How well this works will astound you.

What if you *do* need to screen your calls? (Maybe you're CEO Jeff Bezos at Amazon.com, and potential vendors won't give you a moment's peace, even though you're the wrong person for them to speak with.) At least create a discreet call-screening protocol that protects the feelings of callers:

> **Bad Screen:** "Who's calling?" (Whether or not this is followed by a grudging "please.") "Does he know why you are calling?" "Who are you with?" "What is the nature and purpose of your call?"
>
> **Good Screen:** "Absolutely. May I tell Mr. Bezos who is calling?" (In reality, the caller won't necessarily get Jeff. But hackles aren't raised; feelings are spared. There's no feeling of a test that must be passed—even if, in fact, there is.)

We, by the way, put our mouths where our mouths are, so to speak. Leonardo and Micah—as well as the best bosses we've had in our own careers—are non-phone-screeners. And historically, many titans of industry, up to and including Sam Walton, have been famously accessible on the phone. (We do figure Sam did a few backflips in his grave when Walmart announced years later that online customers were to be banned from even basic 800 telephone support as part of an official Walmart "Customer Contact Reduction" program.)[4]

▶ **To "give good phone," you've got to pick it up!** While you're busy getting your words just right, you also need to set the stage

correctly. Answer the phone in the right number of rings: One or two rings is best, and try to never wait more than three rings.

Here's why: After three rings, which is roughly twelve seconds, callers become anxious. After five or six rings, they become frustrated. After eight or nine, quite irritated. After eleven or twelve, they will of course become angry or alarmed, and will hang up. Explain these reasons to your staff, and they will be more apt to support the no-more-than-three-rings policy because they'll understand how much it reduces client anxiety.

In cyberspace, there are analogs to answering your phone promptly. The following may sound obvious, but bear with us, because we see ugly surprises in this area all the time. Do you know for sure that the ''request for info'' forms on your website actually get where they're going once a customer fills them out? And, if so, whether they're answered quickly? You may be surprised to learn that because of a scripting error they never end up anywhere. Or, almost as bad, that they are delayed at some point in your processes and responded to *en masse* days later—which is a completely unacceptable interval on the Web. These service failures are invisible at the time, but they will ultimately show up in the form of stalled company growth.

Your technical team can help with elaborate and ''statistically valid'' testing systems to prevent these problems, which is very important. But please *supplement* these with a simple reality check any time you get that unsettled feeling inside: Try everything out yourself, as if you were a prospect or a customer. Do this repeatedly, and take nothing for granted. This ''trust no one'' technique puts you in the tiny minority who actually know that their systems work from their customers' perspective.

▶ **On the Internet, nobody knows you're human (so go out of your way to prove it).** Many businesses use Internet tricks as a way to give themselves a phony patina of personalization. As a result, even live customer service staffers attempting to engage online customers one on one may be met with inordinate suspicion. There are ways to turn

these negative expectations to your advantage—by flipping them on their heads in a very visible manner. Here are a few examples:

▶ **If you send out any mass electronic messages, build in a way for customers to immediately reach a real person.** If you are one of the 60,000 people who has asked to receive an automated business email "from Micah Solomon" each month, try *responding* to one of the messages. Who gets right back to you? The *real* Micah. (See the sidebar for Micah's explanation of how he can do this and still get his other work done each day.) Compare this to the many online merchants whose mass email communications begin or end with something like:

"Please do not reply to this message."

To customers, that sounds a lot like:

"Hush now, customer: Don't distract us while we we're busy counting the money you paid us!"

It doesn't matter how competent, efficient, or technically "correct" your correspondence system is; if it makes you seem cold or robotic, your relationship with the customer will falter.

▶ **If your website features "live chat," make it clear you're staffing it with very real and personable human beings.** Even if you've manned Web chat lines with your very best, most expert staffers, users will devalue the service if you withhold full names. Not even your most personable, endearing employee is going to build enduring bonds for you online by typing, "Hi! This is Jane at Company X." Web visitors will assume that "Jane" is a corporate drone—or even a computer program!—sending canned advice out to customers she/it has no interest in hearing from again. This skepticism isn't *your* Jane's fault. It's the fault of all the artificial Janes before her. But it's easily remedied by calling her who she is: *Jane Chang-Katzenberg*.

▶ **Before anybody hits "send," make sure each email starts out on the right foot.** You would never begin a printed letter without some kind of salutation ("Dear," "Hi," etc.). So don't forget the salutation in an email. Even "Yo Mark!" (depending on the formality of your business and relationship, obviously) is better than starting cold with

just a name (''Mark—''), we'd argue. Try out this simple rule, and you'll start to feel your Internet relationships warm up.

Adding a Real Human Touch to a Mass Email Takes Less Time Than You'd Think

With a customer email list of 60,000, can you really find the time to answer replies from anyone who asks for you personally? Micah does so. He finds it less daunting than it sounds, and suggests you try it too. He explains:

"Most customers who've asked to receive a monthly informational or sales email from me don't actually feel a need to communicate one on one with me. So, if they respond it's by clicking on the automated link they were intended to click on (for whatever this month's offer is, for example). If someone's aggravated with our service, however, or someone wants to pitch his kid's Little League jersey sponsorship to me, I feel they ought to be able to get directly to me, right away, without going through any hoops. Because hopefully I can make sure we take care of the problem, or find someone who can, pronto. That's why I make sure that hitting "reply" or clicking on the "Micah" link sends a message directly to me.

"That's not very much to ask of my time. Only a few people use the option, and it's not difficult to set up—no matter what your Internet provider is telling you."