10 strategies for overcoming language barriers

by Kate Berardo

Language barriers are a common challenge in international business settings — and a two-way process. What native speakers often don’t realize is that frequently it is not the other person’s accent but their own way of speaking that creates the greatest barriers to effective communication. Use the strategies below to ensure you’re not putting up your own roadblocks to effective international communication.

1. Speak slowly and clearly.
Focus on clearly enunciating and slowing down your speech. Even if you’re pressured for time, don’t rush through your communication. Doing so often takes more time, as miscommunication and misunderstanding can result and you’ll ultimately have to invest additional time in clearing up the confusion.

2. Ask for clarification.
If you are not 100% sure you’ve understood what others say, politely ask for clarification. Avoid assuming you’ve understood what’s been said.

3. Frequently check for understanding.
Check both that you’ve understood what’s been said and that others have fully understood you. Practice reflective listening to check your own understanding (e.g. “So what I hear you saying is…”) and use open-ended questions to check other people’s understanding. Ask, “what’s your understanding of this process?” instead of “is that clear?”

4. Avoid idioms.
Business language is often contextual, and therefore culture specific. For example, in the US, baseball terms are used extensively: ‘Straight off the Bat,’ Ballpark figures,’ ‘Out in left field,’ ‘Touch base,’ ‘Strike a deal.’ As a good general rule, if the phrase requires knowledge of other information — be it a game or metaphor — recognize that this may make your communication more difficult to be understood.

5. Be careful of jargon.
Watch the use of TLAs (Three Letter Abbreviations) and other organizational language that may not be understood by others. If you use them, provide in parentheses a description of what these are so others can learn to use the same language you do.

6. Define the basics of business.
In international business contexts terms such as: ‘success,’ ‘doneness,’ ‘meetings,’ ‘punctuality,’ etc. may mean different things to different people. Spend time early in your communication defining what these mean to you and others. Invest in building a shared vocabulary.

7. Be specific.
Spell out your expectations and deadlines clearly. Instead of, “Please get back to me shortly,” say “Please email the completed report by 5 pm Eastern Standard time on Wednesday, February 21.”

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Norfolk Mobility has enhanced its online REQUEST A QUOTE capability for individuals and groups.

**Individual Quotes**

Now when individuals go to the REQUEST A QUOTE page on the NMB website, they will find a choice of eight different programs. Each downloadable brochure describes what is provided, who the providers are, available options, and detailed information about specific benefits and premiums. Each brochure also provides a direct link to an online quotation form for the particular program, as well as an email link and phone number should further information be required.

**Group Quotes**

A comprehensive group brochure now provides information about group program offerings, value added services, direct billing partnerships, and a link to a detailed Request A Quote form.

Please contact us if you have questions or suggestions about this service.

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8. Choose your medium of communication effectively.
Carefully choose your form of communication (phone or video conference, email, instant message, etc.). Be mindful not to ‘overuse’ email. While useful, there are times when the medium is likely to be ineffective. When a message is complex and complicated or there is tension or conflict that needs to be resolved, switch to another medium.

9. Provide information via multiple channels.
Follow phone calls with emails that summarize what’s been said. When possible, provide presentations, agendas, etc. in advance so those working in their non-native language can get familiar with materials.

10. Be patient.
Cross-cultural communication takes more time. If not at all times, certainly initially you cannot expect your communication to occur with the same speed and ease as when you are communicating with someone from your own culture.

Kate Berardo is an intercultural trainer and consultant who specializes in programs on cross-cultural awareness, international relocation, and multicultural teambuilding. She is the founder of the global resource site Culturoosity.com and co-author of Putting Diversity to Work.
President’s corner

Norfolk celebrates 25th anniversary

On July 1, 2011 the Norfolk brand name celebrated its 25th anniversary in Canada. It has been a long, exciting and successful run with many interesting changes and developments along the way.

Norfolk got its start in 1986 and was originally a provider of group benefits brokerage and consulting services, operating only in Calgary. Norfolk also serviced a small but fast growing list of clients with operations abroad. In 2003, Norfolk International was created to better differentiate the two distinct lines of business. The domestic practice was sold in 2005 and now forms part of the Calgary office of Morneau Sobeco. A year later Norfolk International was sold to Mobility Saint Honore of France, and the name became Norfolk Mobility Benefits. NMB has been growing forward throughout North America ever since.

For the past 25 years, our mission has always been ‘Delivering innovative, value-added expatriate insurance services in anticipation of our clients’ global needs’. I think it’s good for at least another 25!

Richard Albert
President and CEO

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### NMB Claims Administration and Call Centre Report

#### SERVICE LEVEL AND OPERATING METRICS

(as at June 30, 2011)

**Claims Administration and Call Centre Services**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Measure (June 2011)</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average backlog of claims (Days)</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>7 business days from receipt*</td>
<td>Measured once per month (end of the month)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of calls answered</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>90% of calls will be answered</td>
<td>Measured as average over period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calls answered in less than 20 seconds</td>
<td>2,028</td>
<td></td>
<td>Measured once per month (end of the month)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of calls answered – 20 seconds</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>70% of calls will be answered within 20 seconds</td>
<td>Measured as average over period</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of claims processed</td>
<td>6,539</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Eligibility and Premium Administration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Measure (June 2011)</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Processing speed of enrollments and employee changes*</td>
<td>Within 5 business days</td>
<td>5 business days from receipt*</td>
<td>Measured once per week (beginning of day Tuesday)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average release date of monthly premium invoice</td>
<td>17-May-11</td>
<td>Monthly invoices issued by the 30th of the preceding month</td>
<td>Measured once per month (end of the month)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of invoices issued on time</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>80% of invoices will be issued on time</td>
<td>Measured once per month (end of the month)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Green* Meeting service level  
*Yellow* Just below service level  
*Red* Significantly below service level

*Measured by determining the earliest, unprocessed item and measuring the number of business days between the date of receipt and date of completion, provided that complete and accurate information has been provided.
Protect your children – and pets – from the heat!

No matter where in the world you are, on a hot day the inside of a car can reach 51°C in as little as 10 minutes. This is why people should never leave children or pets inside vehicles in hot weather, even for a few minutes.

According to Janette Fennell, founder and president of Kids and Cars, a U.S. nonprofit group that advocates for child safety, roughly 36 infants and children die annually in the U.S. due to being trapped in hot cars. This does not include those who do not die, but who suffer seriously from the intense heat. Surprisingly enough, she says these accidents often have little to do with how good a parent is, and everything to do with how memory functions — or doesn’t function. “In the early ’90s, these cases were rare,” she says, “but then, in the mid-’90s, front-passenger airbags were installed in cars, and there was a huge campaign to get kids to move to the backseat. An unintended consequence of this was kids dying of hypothermia in cars — because children were out of sight, out of mind.”

Fennell shares three ways to help prevent these deadly accidents:

• Keep a teddy bear or stuffed animal in your child’s car seat. Whenever your child is in the car seat, put the stuffed animal in the front passenger seat as a visual reminder that your child is in the car.

• Keep your lunch bag, employee badge or purse in the backseat. That way, you’ll always reach into your backseat or open your back door when you arrive at your destination.

• Have an ironclad policy with your daycare provider that if your child does not show up, someone will call a provided list of contacts to confirm his or her whereabouts. “In so many cases, if the daycare provider would have called, tragedy could have been averted,” says Fennell. Click here for more information.

About Pets and Heat

Opening the windows, parking in the shade or providing water are not enough to prevent heat exhaustion and eventually heat stroke in dogs after a very short period of time in intense heat. Dogs (and cats) cool themselves by panting and by releasing heat through their paws. On summer days the air and upholstery in your vehicle can heat up to high temperatures that make it impossible for pets to cool themselves. So on hot summer days, pets will be much more comfortable if left at home. Click here for more information.

Employee profile…

Christopher Koo

Team Lead, Archives and Office Support

Christopher comes from the island of Mauritius and moved to Canada when he was 17. He is fluent in English, French and Creole. He joined Norfolk Mobility in 2007 and started as an Office Administrator in charge of reception of the mail, answering emails and phone calls. As the work volume increased, a team was assembled to work for Christopher. Last year Christopher was appointed coordinator for Archives and Office Support. His current position is very diverse and versatile. It includes document management, helping to improve processes that the company uses, sometimes training new staff, and resolving disputes. Christopher says that “One of the things that I particularly like about what I am doing is that I get to work on various projects that help to improve customer service quality and efficiency within the company. For example, I am responsible for compiling the daily, weekly and monthly statistics related to claims, emails and phone calls that enable us to measure our response times in addressing customer needs.” Christopher says, “Anyone in the office will tell you that I am always smiling. It’s because I am very happy with my work.”