

Transcription - Business First Language

Welcome back I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. Today we're going to explore the idea that everyone speaks at least two languages. The first language is the language in use for general everyday communication and the second language, which is probably one that is more important for this discussion anyway, is your business language. It is the language that is your first language in the business world. It's the language you talk when you are talking to your team, to your industry, to anyone who interacts with your business and this is particularly relevant to me at the moment because I am dealing with people outside of my business who are speaking their own first language and expecting me, as the customer, to understand. It's not the first time I've come across this and as you know, communication is a bit of an issue for me, so I want to talk today about how you can remember that when you are talking to your customers particularly, whether they're internal or external, that you need to be mindful of the fact that you will refer to your first language, your first business language and use your acronyms and use your terms that you're used to, and your customer, they have absolutely no idea what you're talking about.

My very best example is that at the moment I am a week away from heading off to Barbados for the World Flower Show, which regular listeners of this podcast will know has been an impending exercise for the last three years. I am responsible for the Australian exhibit, I need to take Australian native plant material with me and that has been an exercise in learning another language, in terms of bureaucracy, that I have been dealing with, to get quarantine certificates. The very first email and every email since, has talked about a particular database called a MiCal database and every interaction with this department has assumed that I understand what they're talking about. It's not a common knowledge database that is used in the floral world. It is particularly related to quarantine so unless you were exporting or importing continuously, you wouldn't know about this language, this term in their language, but I was expected to understand it, to know everything about it. The next step that I wanted to also talk about, in terms of customers, was that they referred me to a six-step process that I needed to complete to be able to successfully export the plant material that I needed to take to Barbados. I thought, that's excellent, I'm so happy that they've got this six-step process on the website, I'll be able to follow it. I went to the web page, very nicely laid out, nice clear instructions. I get through first step, get through the second step, get through to the third step and I click on the third step and it says here are the guidelines for exporting plant material. I think, that's even better, they've got guidelines, it'll be like a fact sheet and it'll take me through the process, I'll understand what they require, what I need to do, it's all nice and clear. I'm halfway through the process, all going well, so I opened the document. It said "Guidelines To Exporting Plant Material" and I find that it is 66 pages long and I'm still on step three. I don't really want to look at what steps four, five and six are because I've got to read 66 pages of a protocol that relates to everything under the sun that you might want to export, that cover the the realm of plant material. I do understand that they need to have it, but I don't think it encourages anyone to actually go through the process unless you want to do these things on a commercial basis. Again it's about the language and about the process. Yes, this is an important process for them and this is very good because it covers everyone that might want to do it. The third part of this interaction has been the email process of contacting the

department. I sent a general enquiry initially and got the automated response saying that someone from the section would respond within one to five days. I thought, well that's okay I suppose, but I really didn't understand why it was going to take that long. I got an answer within 24 hours, which was excellent. It came from a general number, they asked for a little bit more information than I had said originally and I responded to the email, only to find that it goes back to the general pool, it's not an individual email, it goes back to the general pool so I get the same automated response saying there will be a response in one to five days. I get another answer from the same person who sent the first email, with a particular document but to make sure I send it today because the person only works Monday to Thursday. I thought, I can't send it to you directly because the only thing I could do is reply to this email that you sent me and that goes to the general email. I don't know whether it's getting to you or not. I can't get it back to you today and as it stands, I haven't had a response from all the work, so I don't know whether it got there or not, but in the scheme of things it was just a second checking of some documentation. I don't need to know that it got there particularly, but mainly think that perhaps when we set up these systems where we have one general email that all inquiries go to and all answers come from, that we are not really providing the level of customer service or confidence that customers might want in our products and services. That's my rant so far, six minutes. I'll let herself talk now.

I think there's very very important lessons from that experience. Firstly the only language you should be speaking and using is the recipient or participant's language, not yours. If you look at organizations, and I've been in organizations where my first exposure is the same as so many others. You're sitting at your first meeting and the number of acronyms being used have been so long, I start writing them down so then after the meeting I could educate myself what they mean.

I have to say that I'm also on the National Parks Advisory Committee and the Area Manager reports were so full of acronyms that we actually had, initially for the first few years, we would guess what the acronym meant and it was a great activity at the meetings to compare what we thought the acronym meant. We got quite creative in the end. Towards the end of his tenure we said, just give us a summary of what it all means. You can still write that way but at least give us the translation.

What happened at my first meeting in this organization, I was writing them diligently down, they were so confusing in the sense that I didn't even know whether one of them was a name of a system, a name of a team, or a project a name. I couldn't even relate it. One of the people that been there for a few years noticed that and in a break said to me, what are you writing down? It seems to be a list rather than notes, what is that? I told him and he said, oh you don't have to do that, we know it's a problem so we have that, not just for you newcomers but for us existing people who've been here, we actually have a book so you can look it up on the intranet and it says what it means. There's a lesson in that. Why don't you speak so everybody can understand immediately, whether they're part of the organization, whether they are your customer, whether they in other areas of the organization, you can say a name description of a project as quickly as you can say the acronym in case I don't know what the short cut is.

If you also want to get results, don't do what Kim just experienced then, that is making the process so cumbersome and so long that you invariably create more work for yourself

because people will either send it incomplete or they're going to ring you to clarify. Keep it simple, keep it to the point and from the recipient or participant's point of view, anybody should be able to read it, understand it and be able to respond accurately and completely to what they need to do. I don't think it's an isolated issue. It's certainly something that I have experienced across many institutions, corporations and small businesses and it can be face to face or it can be internet-based. It is about making sure that your team understands their role in the communication process and that your internal system and what you need to do to make something happen is absolutely no interest to your customers.

If I go to the bank and I want US dollars, I don't care that you have to send away to get that currency. I don't care whether you've got it in stock or not, I just need to know that I can get it and how long it's going to take, when I can get it and how much it's going to cost. There's no point in explaining to me that, oh we need five days because we have to send away for it. All I need to know is it'll take five days for me to have my result that I want from this activity to happen. How you make it happen is of no consequence to me and what's worse is that when that is presented, your internal process is presented as the reason why I can't have something or I can only have something in a limited way, that just rubs me completely the wrong way because it's not my responsibility or indeed my interest to look after your system or to know what your system is. It's got nothing to do with me. It's like other people's opinions of me - they've got nothing to do with me, that's their opinion.

Also we need to think about if we train ourselves to speak directly and in plain English everywhere, that would work. If we start speaking business speak, if you like, and in this example we're talking about your business first language, that means it can be unique to you and no-one else gets it. Be mindful also of general business speak. A friend of a friend was saying to me how their mother comes home and speaks "business" at home and I said what does that mean? They gave me an example of where just I'm telling mum what happened during the day or on the football field and she says no no no, haven't got time, just give me an exact summary. That sounds efficient and yes, they should learn, but you know we could have worded it differently. If it's one of your business colleagues and you're talking about, you know, getting the house cleaned and you said you're outsourcing that activity, that makes sense. But if you are in different company, with children or whatever, you use language that's going to mean something to the people you're talking to and it's going to translate in one outcome you wanted to happen and that's not to say that you can't use those.

I have the most wonderful story from my time with a retail outlet at the lolly shop. Naturally I've got quite a range of customers come through the door and I had a family come in on this memorable day, two children, probably eight and five. Kids walking in to a lolly shop, you know, they're just in awe but often overwhelmed by the jars on the wall and all the colors or choices they've got. These two kids were allowed to choose what they wanted within their budget that they had. The older one, who was probably around about ten, picked out the most sugary, the most colorful, most interesting collection of lollies that he wanted, he brought them over to the counter. His mother said to him, looked at him and said to him with a straight face (and it was very difficult for me to keep a straight face after she said it), she looked at him and said "have you done a risk assessment on that choice"? To this day I do not know whether she was joking or not. I don't think she was because he seemed to understand what

she was asking, so it was obviously a discussion or a conversation or the language that they were used to at home, but it was so out of place for me that I couldn't quite come to grips with it, so I just focused very much on being the lolly lady and just counted out the lollies.

That's a great example of using the language but in this particular case, actually ticked the boxes I talked about. He understood, she got the right outcome, so I can't complain.

I should have asked what the risk assessment was! I imagine the risk assessment is having to go to the dentist. I think we've probably covered that to a certain extent. It is an issue that I think we'll be referring back to, it's something that's quite close to my set of standards and I do like to see that organisations are taking on the idea that they have a business language that is their first language that they talk about internally. Make sure though, that everyone internally understands it and that externally, for your customers regardless of their internal or external customers, that there is a language that should be common between you and them. That's it for today, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.