

Plain English

Everyone in business has to learn it these days, except the British themselves... which could be a mistake, says Fiona Talbot.

You have the right product to export to continental Europe. You know the procedures you must follow. You're homing in on your potential buyer. Your attitude is right and things are looking good. But you're not necessarily home and dry if your 'plain English' words do not match your customers' expectations.

Companies are increasingly understanding the importance of getting this aspect right in their UK business. It certainly takes a conscious effort on the part of all staff who have to communicate on behalf of their company. (Is there actually anyone who doesn't?) Even in the home market, mistakes are going to distort your message and even affront your customers. How many times have you seen 'effect' used wrongly for 'affect', or 'complimentary' for 'complementary'? They're just two small examples of sloppy business communication. And as for the correct use of apostrophes, well, some businesses forget it altogether. So just imagine the hurdles involved when you have to take other business cultures' expectations into account as well.

Competitive environments

I previously co-founded EFB – English for Business Consultancy in Rotterdam and have first-hand knowledge from my clients there, of the difficulties that can be involved. Working as they did for shipping, airline, retail and financial companies amongst others, they were all too aware that in intensely competitive environments, one must be seen to shine.

Very many businesses based in Rotterdam – a World Port and Gateway to Europe as it is proudly known – have to use English as it is the international business language. Lucky us, we can say. What a great advantage we have when we trade overseas. And of course up to a point that is true.

Yet it can lead us to overlook some crucially important facts. Esperanto – specifically devised as an international language – enjoys a grammar that's regular and greatly simplified. Can we say that about English? Foreign business associates are always asking me "Why?" when they see certain constructions that we use. "Well, that's how it is!" is the less than erudite yet correct answer meted out.

But as the very nature of business communication should be to seal business, why create unnecessary problems with the grammatical forms we can, after all, choose to use? We can take some tips from Esperanto and avoid confusing constructions. It's true that we will lose some of the beauty of our language when, out of business necessity, we reduce words to some sort of common denominator. In practical terms, English has an extremely rich lexis.

Splendid expressions like 'heralding a new era' may have to become more prosaic, like 'introducing a new age', and so on. It can be the somewhat sad price of internationalism, because so many of our nuances are completely lost on foreigners. They simply might not understand them. Sometimes, however, we might think that they have understood them when they use them back to us. Be careful to check though. A Dutchman will almost invariably use the words 'a couple of weeks' to denote 'a few weeks'. The distinction is unknown in his language. It can put your orders out though.

Quite clear?

On the other hand, you might imagine when your foreign buyer says "That's quite a good price" that he or she's looking for a better one, and you can discount further to secure business. It can actually have meant "That's a very good price" because 'quite' is often used instead of 'very' by non-British dealers.

As another example, don't use the expression 'a fortnight' in preference to 'two weeks'. It's not always taught at schools abroad. You've really got to adopt a new mind-set and it can lose you money not to. There are structured approaches which will help, because you really have to be systematic.

In speech too, you'll often have to choose more simple expressions and, as for colloquialisms, you should usually avoid them. Don't ask your foreign colleagues to give figures off the top of their heads, or tell them that the meeting seems to be dragging on till the cows come home. It won't necessarily work. Although, having said that, be prepared for some foreign associates to sprinkle their conversation with the one or two colloquialisms they are so proud to have picked up.

German schools clearly teach the expression 'that fudges the issue' and the Dutch are so pleased when they can observe that 'it's raining cats and dogs'. For my part, I too was delighted when I could comment 'En klaar is Kees', the Dutch equivalent of the really useful business expression 'Bob's your uncle' !

Money-saver

The good news about editing down to simpler expressions is that it will ultimately save you time and money. You will send the right message clearly. Beyond that, we have to remember that different nationalities in Europe do use differing thought processes. Some are good on the straights but not so good on the corners. Others are educated to think more laterally. Some speak their minds directly; others hind behind language. We'll leave you to guess who fits which description!

Of course we're talking of stereotypes here but any of us who have worked abroad know that there are differences to be taken on board. The irony is that British companies don't always see that they have to alter their approach, when it's their own language that's in use!

Why not try out an internal communication audit to see how well you fare in the accuracy

and clarity stakes at home?

My conclusion is this. If we're complacent about the words we use we can lose sales. Why?

- Because in almost all cases, foreigners will be using a limited sub-set of Business English vocabulary. Their meanings may not be our meanings.
- This means that, more than ever, UK businesses need to edit their words for their market to avoid confusion, even outright misunderstanding.
- More than ever, we need to remove errors in our communication to them. We know that they can confuse and annoy the native market. Imagine the cost of getting it wrong in the foreign market where they are even more likely to distort your message completely.
- Never has it been more necessary to empathise. Put yourself in their shoes: help them with your words. It could seal the deal!

- Ends-

For further details please contact Fiona Talbot



on 01244 342 683

or e-mail tqi@ndirect.co.uk

or visit www.wordpowerskills.com