

business issues

DON'T GET LOST IN TRANSLATION

BY ANNE SCARLETT

Studying up on your prospects' preferences, terminology and context will strengthen your connection—and your ultimate impact.

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN in a situation where you were surrounded by people who didn't speak your "language?"

Perhaps it was overt, such as when you were traveling abroad and realized that crucial information was being shared rapid-fire, but it was all going over your head. Or perhaps it was closer to home, such as being called upon by a sales person who floods the conversation with unfamiliar specialized jargon, or attending a business conference where the content is beyond your expertise.

What did you feel—and think—in these moments? Perhaps you were overcome with feelings of impatience, frustration or dread, or thought, "I'm stupid," or even, "Get me out of here!" But it isn't just about you not understanding them. It's also about them not understanding you.

A literal example: My in-laws are German. They speak German 85% of the time and English 15% of the time. Until recently, I spoke exactly zero German. Clearly, there was a disconnect. So imagine their joy when I started learning their language and surprised them with some limited conversation in German during our last visit to Germany. Boosting my conversation to 15% German resulted in a new level

of familiarity—which led to openness, camaraderie and, yes, more trust.

Business Speak

In the construction world, the selling cycle can be quite long. Depending upon the market sector, along with the size and scale of a particular client or project, the sales cycle can sometimes extend well over a year.

During this cycle, we have a lot to gain by speaking the "language" of our prospects. It's one method toward keeping the sales process moving forward rather than letting it fizzle out. Conversely, if we don't speak their language, the prospects may be patient with us—or they may not. Why take the risk? Err on the side of

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learning their language. Doing so will not only help you on your current project but also on future ones. Plus, it's never a bad thing to add to your skill set.

So what does a prospect's "language" mean in this context? And how can we become "fluent?" Consider these tips:

Ask the good questions; parrot back their language. Years ago, a fellow consultant told me, "No one will argue with their own words." Listen very carefully to everything your prospects say, and weave their exact words into your own materials/content/conversation when appropriate. Try it; it really works!

Use their technical jargon, not yours. Let's say your firm has a presence in the healthcare sector but you've personally only been exposed to corporate office projects. You can read up on the sector but you should also talk with folks that have first-hand experience. Get a crash course in the relevant technical jargon. Listen carefully to the terminology. Identify any jargon similarities between the two sectors. Take notes and ask questions so that you don't misuse terms. And be sure to stay current. While some jargon has been around for a while, remember that languages—including business terminology and technical jargon—evolve over time.



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Offer industry insight, especially that of a competitor.

It doesn't always have to be firsthand knowledge. Perhaps it's something you've read about the current state of their industry and/or their competitors. Make sure you use your RSS feed (an online reader service such as Google Reader) to track the prospect, their industry and their competitors. Keeping up on the news, so to speak, communicates sharpness and interest.

Adjust the way you frame your message. In professional services marketing, a one-size-fits-all approach is a bad way to go. From sector to sector, prospects will differ. What resonates with a university prospect may not resonate with a municipal prospect. While your value propositions and core messages may be the same for everyone, you must couch them within the prospect's own language. In other words, know (and talk like) your audience.

During a conversation, check in often and always watch for the "twitch factor." Of course the prospect wants to be heard and understood. Yet you are the one doing the selling. Therefore you are the one that has the most to lose if they don't understand you. Watch them carefully and check in often during a conversation to make sure they are feeling comfortable and are clear with what you're saying—and in a perfect world, in agreement or at least on the same page.

Architects, engineers and other construction professionals are all expected to sell, to some degree, on behalf of their firm. Make a concerted effort to speak the language of your prospects, and watch eyes light up, connections strengthen and sales processes move forward more effectively and efficiently. In this area of communication, a little effort goes a long way and a lot of effort goes even further.

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