

I get inside your customer's head

Catherine Shovlin, Customer Interpreter



What is a Customer Interpreter?

What a Customer Interpreter® does, and why it's the key to a successful business. Including

- 4 techniques for a Customer Interpreter
- 3 applications for your business

If you run a business in your own country, you probably believe you speak the same language as your customer.

But do your customers think you speak the same language as them?

Overcoming the communications gap makes obvious business sense. More and more customers have choices and they choose suppliers and products that they can identify with. None of us like to feel misled, or patronised or misunderstood. So if they can relate better to your business, they're more likely to buy from you.

Getting it wrong

Consider the following example from a company specialising in career management services trying to word its advertising.

Customer Interpreter: "Can we say 'job' here instead of 'position'?"

Client: "Oh no, our customers don't like to be so blatant, they have careers, not jobs. We should say appointment or position instead"

We agreed I would talk to some customers. Those customers told us that an appointment was for the dentist's and a position - well that could be lots of things. They were completely relaxed about the word job and that was what they spontaneously used. Even worse, the company's delicacy with language was off-putting to some clients and worked against the image the company was trying to create of being straightforward and proactive.

What exactly do you mean?

As web marketing and search engine technology becomes increasingly important for all of us, using the same words as your customer becomes more important than ever. Chances are that if a customer phones to ask if you *mend hoovers*, they'll be given the right answer. But if they do a search and you've described yourselves as *fixing vacuum cleaners*, they might never even know you exist.

Of course search engines are improving all the time, and more recent developments such as EasyAsk work on so-called *natural English* to greatly improve the chances of people finding what they want.

So far most web-retailers are not using that kind of technology though. I recently searched for *training pants* (the stage after nappies) on a leading retail website and was offered ladies hosiery and a CD! A search for a *trimmer* was similarly unproductive. I didn't know the official word for these items so I couldn't find it with the search. Yet, after several more minutes clicking through directory systems I tracked down what I needed. And although one supermarket

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is using PR to promote its *fair trade* products, very few of them come up under that search. It's not that the products aren't there. It's that the website builders speak a different language to the customers.

Do you know how many of your customers just give up and go elsewhere when that happens? Imagine the management and staff of a store deliberately sending customers to the wrong department. Or out of the door.

You're more likely to get a positive reaction from your customers if you listen to what they say and speak in a way that makes sense to them.

Press releases

This is another area where the internal view can often eclipse the message for the consumer. As press releases typically have to go through various internal clearance procedures, they can end up littered with company jargon which is of no interest to your target audience. If you couldn't show it to the guy in the corner shop and have him get the point, then it probably isn't as effective as your board believes it to be. Many press releases are about what the company wants to say about itself, not what the reader wants to hear. Yet it all seems so obvious - why don't companies just get it right?

Why does it happen?

Intellectually, it's not such a difficult thing to fix. The main barriers to this tend to be emotional ones though and you may recognise some of the following examples:

- The technical manager who loves her job and wants to include every incomprehensible (to the customer) detail in the company brochure
- The chief exec who wants to start every press release with a paragraph about how important the company is
- The middle-aged middle-class marketing manager who cannot believe customers could have such poor taste and tailors all communications for the Woking Golf Club audience
- The ad agency full of wacky 23 year olds trying to "spice up" a leaflet about pet insurance for 50+ year old cat lovers

It's a case where the old adage "people like people who are like themselves" can work entirely against the interests of your organisation if staff are not prepared to recognise that the customer has a right to be different.

Know your customers for who they are

Customers bring with them a few inconvenient attributes:

- They're not all identical
- They have minds of their own
- The irrational/intangible plays an important role in their decision making
- They won't conform to your organisational charts
- They don't listen properly when you are talking to them

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- They go elsewhere when they're not satisfied

A lot of this can be lost in the law of averages. So long as you measure total sales and they're roughly in line with the plan, it is easy to overlook any of these factors. Which is fine if you want to miss an opportunity to increase sales. On the other hand you could treat your customers like individual human beings and see how that works.

Getting it right

I recommend **customer immersion** for any business manager whose organisation sells anything to anybody. Don't be surprised if some of this feels odd at first. You might find it easier and more productive to stick to informal chats, and you'll need to avoid the temptation to convert or enlighten the customer (or non-customer)

Technique 1: Focus on customers

An easy way to do this is to observe a focus group. A few clips of real-life customer quotes thrown into an internal meeting can be worth pages of quantitative analysis. And once you get people on your team interested in the customer, they often find it as fascinating as Big Brother. If you can also involve staff from invoicing or legal or operations, so much the better.

Technique 2: Get into the customer's shoes and walk around for a day

In one project to develop a loyalty scheme for taxi drivers we sent John from the marketing department to hang out with taxi drivers. The first day he hated it, it was outside of his comfort zone, they didn't have much respect for him, and he felt like he was wasting his time. At the end of three days he came back to the office full of enthusiasm for "my taxi drivers" and bursting with ideas for how to set up the scheme. It was a great success on a low budget, gaining a market leader position in a very influential sector. Because John understood his customers so well there was no wastage. And word had got around that community that these guys really cared and took their customer seriously, so they wanted to demonstrate their appreciation by joining the club. They even voted John "Best friend of our country's taxi drivers" the following year.

Technique 3: Customer conversations

Everyday conversations are valuable too. The woman at the bus stop may only be a sample of one, but it could be that her views on mail order catalogues hit the nail on the head. She's not ticking a box on a questionnaire (and how often is there the answer you actually want to give as one of the options?) and she's not subject to what can be the surreal dynamics of a focus group. Having more than one such conversation can help convince the more sceptical members of your organisation that actually there's some validity in this approach. It does require careful listening - and biting back the urge to defend your product or educate the customer.

Once everybody in your organisation starts to know the customer in this way it will be more obvious why your own messages need to fit the customer's world as well as your own. Nobody can get to know a statistic.

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Technique 4: Fly on the wall

If your product or service involves a physical interaction, then you can learn a lot by observing customer behaviour. Who nearly comes in then goes away again? Who crosses the threshold then gets put off by their first impressions? What do they do once they're in? How do they interact with the environment, the staff and other customers?

Using what you know

Now you've seen a little of the world through your customers' eyes, how can that help with your communications?

Application 1: Who are you?

The easiest way I know to get good value from marketing communications is to have a clear sense of who you are and what messages you're trying to get across. This also provides an alternative to the high level of subjectivity in assessing advertising and promotional material. You can move away from the unhelpful territory of

"I'm not sure why but I just don't like this"

to the much more fruitful ground of

"This one hits 5 out of 6 of our values and supports 2 of this year's key messages, let's go for it"

So make sure your organisation has a common sense of your brand in its broadest sense. A list of 5 key words that everybody agrees on can have more practical impact on your communications than long, aspirational visions and strategies that nobody can get to grips with. Half a day spent on this is usually enough and reaps rewards afterwards.

Application 2: What do you have that's worth saying?

We all know what it's like to have information overload. Just look at that stack of trade press on the corner of your desk that you're going to read later, when you've got more time. So why do it to our customers? Too much copy is quicker to write than the right amount, but it's less likely to get your message across. Get the three line version first, and then expand. Take a deep breath and delete everything that's about personal or corporate ego.

Application 3: Speak to ME

Then translate what you've got into customer speak. This isn't dumbing down, it's wising up. If you've spent time with customers you'll know what they call your product and what they like about it. Feed it back to them. Use their words. Avoid patronising language; it just makes most customers feel insecure or irritated. Test it out, not with the board but with the kind of people who'll be reading it. You don't need a big survey to tell you that a sentence doesn't work if it is misunderstood by the first 3 people you ask. Have the courage of the customer's convictions.

We live and die by the buying decisions our customers make. Treating them with the respect they deserve makes our jobs easier and is good for business. Buck the trend, learn a new language and talk to your customers.

Failing that, you could always hire a Customer Interpreter.