

Cutting Through The Cultures

How many contracts have you lost through lack of skill in another language?

The answer may be difficult to quantify even if you know that you have lost some. What about:

How many contracts have you lost through lack of cultural awareness?

Now this question poses a bit of a conundrum. If you are not aware of subtle cultural differences, how can you possibly know if you have lost orders because of it? It would be easy to blame the lost contract on market conditions, price or not quite meeting the specification when in fact the underlying cause may have been a cultural blunder.

It was only after many years of language learning and travelling that I became specifically interested in cultural differences with a degree in German, 2 years living in German-speaking countries and nearly 8 years in export already under my belt. So am I an expert? The answer has to be an emphatic 'no' because the more I read about this subject and take note of situations when abroad, the more I realise how little I actually know. Each time I look back at my export experience, my list of previous cultural mistakes grows longer! Not all resulted in lost business, but in hindsight if you have a unique product many cultural mistakes may be overlooked, even if they do not endear you to your customer! Selling on price, quality and service alone requires a much more refined knowledge of the customer's culture.

I particularly recall our export team trying to sell to a certain state-owned company in the Middle East. We knew they had a need, we knew they were buying from our competitors in Italy. Our prices were not dissimilar to the Italian prices, but we reckoned our technical support was far better. Several meetings with the client produced no headway, but it was easy to make excuses for our lack of performance. Then an English distributor offered his services. We had nothing to lose, but were still horrified when he planned to go in with prices raised by 20%. But he knew the market, he knew how to handle our potential customer and he got results. Within two years this Middle Eastern client had become our largest single customer, spending £1 million with us per annum.

Language skills are vitally important in today's international market place, but it can be argued that cultural awareness is even more important for two reasons.

Firstly it may be difficult for companies dealing internationally to have speakers of every language spoken by their clients. Learning a multitude of languages would probably be beyond most companies in terms of time and money, but learning about the principal cultural differences would not only be less time-consuming but also go a long way towards being accepted by the clients and giving the impression that you are 'nice to do business with'.

Secondly, language skills may be no use at all if sufficient time has not been spent on acquiring cultural knowledge. A fluent speaker still may not be accepted by a client if his or her attitude towards the culture makes the client feel awkward and uncomfortable, just as American behaviour and attitudes can often grate on British people, even though we ostensibly speak the same language.

Life would certainly be dull if we were all the same, but understanding cultural differences may make all the difference between success and failure in international business.

This article was written by Sally, Associate Trainer to MyTrainingExpert. If you would like to know more about Sally please contact our team of Learning professionals.