

## “Could You Repeat That?”

By Cathie M. Clark

I had the opportunity to call Member Services at my healthcare provider this morning. My call was answered by someone saying a string of words I could not understand at all. “I’m sorry,” I responded, “could you repeat that?” He did, but it was still gibberish. “I’m sorry, I do not understand you.” I said, to which he responded (a tiny bit clearer) “My words or the line?” Unfortunately, it was his words, and I hated to say so but did, and apologetically asked if I could speak to someone else. He put me on hold to try to find someone — in the end he could not and suggested I call back later (at least that’s what I thought he said).

I wondered: *Why was I the one apologizing?* Why was he there — in a position of responsibility for verbal communication when he could not communicate? This happens to us all the time these days, especially since the cost-cutting trend of Call Centers off-shored in countries for which English is a second language has become the norm.

I was taught to speak by my parents: Dad from Boston, and Mom from Niagara Falls NY. Often there were disagreements on pronunciation: “Car” or “Cah”. “Horse” or “Hoss”. “Yard” or “Yahd”. Mom prevailed eventually, because I wanted to be a radio announcer. The importance of doing it her way over Dad’s was drilled home by a live radio advertisement we heard on our local FM station for the Gloucester (correctly pronounced Gloster) House Restaurant. “Go to da Glosta House Rest’ront on histawric Seven Seas Waaf.” Even Dad had to agree it sounded awful.

I never did go to broadcasting school, instead taking my first job as a secretary which required that I answer incoming calls to the business; and so on for each job I held thereafter for many years. Upon my assuming that duty, there were always compliments coming back via my bosses that the international clients appreciated my diction. “Very professional” they said. So you can imagine, having my own calls answered by individuals who cannot clearly and distinctly speak our language drives me crazy. It has compelled me to the above-described flat-out refusal to continue speaking with someone who can’t speak adequately, never mind WELL.

I hate doing it, but after all these years I justify that I am saving the business owner time on unproductive 800-number minutes. So why am I still apologizing? It is hard not to offend in expressing dissatisfaction of this type. I feel rude in so doing, but I do it because I think they should be apologizing to ME. To be more exact, the manager who set up this system and the personnel for those positions should be doing the apologizing.

WHO — if anyone — listens to the “your call is being recorded for quality purposes” recordings? If the call is strewn with “can you repeat that?” or “say that again, please”, or in worst cases a resultant hang-up before the business is completed, it is NOT “quality”. Also, the “survey” questions that sometimes follow never contain a question such as “please rate the language quality of our representative on a scale of 1-5”. Why not?

Funny: I once found myself asking my Southern-transplant roommate (whose sentences were a proud and purposeful string of mush): “Are you speaking to hear yourself talk? Or to be understood?” No one had ever asked him that before, because they were too busy asking ME “What’d he say?” But the question should drive telephone customer service today — being *understood* is key to the success of all transactions, and that burden lies with the speaker, not the listener struggling to comprehend.

It would be a great improvement if training for off-shored Call Center people would include radio-announcer type exercises. I’m not suggesting everyone sound like announcer-extraordinaire Gary Owens from the 1960s show “Laugh-In” (although it would be fun). I’m just saying that something more in that direction would be helpful. And — please! —the response

when one is asked to repeat something should be done SLOWLY instead of even faster, which is often the unproductive case.

We all hate the thought of computers taking jobs away from people. Menu-driven recorded communication has been moving us in that direction. In my opinion, that may be where we are headed if we don’t insist upon telephone calls being handled excellently by humans who can “talk the talk” and build lasting relationships with each interaction. When we need help, we should be able to call confidently instead of with dread.

It goes without saying that caring enough to employ — and if necessary, *train* — a crew who *speaks well* to your clients *speaks volumes* for your business.

#####

The views and opinions expressed in this *CMC Opinion* article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Cathie M. Clark Consulting, LLC.

Cathie M. Clark is a communication consultant and published author, having served such companies as Aon Consulting, Aon Hewitt, Xerox Business Services, and Conduent HR Consulting, producing executive-quality hard copy and electronic communication for their clients.

Cathie M. Clark Consulting, LLC is a woman-owned startup consulting firm in Seabrook NH — formed with the support of the NH UES “Pathway to Work” program and NH Small Business Development. On the web: [www.cathiemclark.com](http://www.cathiemclark.com).