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GLOBALSPEAK

Relationship Building before and after the Internet

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16 JAN 2013: A common concern amongst travellers is that they don't speak the language at the destination and therefore they fear that they will get caught up in a Tower of Babel as they try to check into the hotel, order food, engage the taxi driver or even negotiate their way into and then out of the country. It is fairly cut and dried. You

either speak Igbo (as do roughly 24 million people in Nigeria) or the other 7000 global languages, or you don't.



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But many travellers confuse 'speaking' with 'understanding' and then when they throw 'communication' into the mix, they can get very frustrated and fall back on a destination they have previously visited.

And why should you, as a travel professional be concerned? In a word: Boredom. In a few words: 'My agent never suggests anything new so it's time to change agents'.

But let's go back a bit. Without formally 'speaking' a language, you can learn a few words and thereby establish relationships through - eye contact - body language - a smile - or even a handshake.

We just need to look at American sign language to remind our clients that 'speaking' comes in many forms and there are internationally recognized

signs and symbols that elicit gestures of happiness, sadness, anger, curiosity and more anywhere you travel around the globe.

Clients who say they are too intimidated to explore new destinations need your reassurance that speaking a foreign language is not necessarily an issue in travel. Many agencies already offer a sheet of basic vocabulary - either prepared by the agency or by the wholesaler as part of a trip preparation kit.

Of course any traveller can purchase a language book or subscribe to a language programme (i.e. itunes has the Earworm series), or get some lessons from a native speaker (for the record, Toronto alone represents over 140 different languages). However, not all of us have the aptitude to learn a new language. No fear, as there other methods of 'speaking' that can be considered.

There are 'wordless' language books available, in which a series of categorized pictures covering the most common areas are presented. All the traveller needs to do is point to the photo to indicate bus tickets or postage stamps and hold up the number of the corresponding number of fingers. I used the book once when I lost the key to my luggage in a small town in Indonesia and despite my attempt to act out the action of cutting off the lock, the hotel staff did not quite understand my request. Then I had my 'aha' moment. I dove into my daypack and brought out the wordless language book. I found the 'tools' page and pointed to a pair of wire-cutters. The staff broke up in laughter at their own 'aha' moment and my problem with the lock was soon resolved. Because of this incident, everyone in the small hotel was extremely friendly to me

after that and we exchanged hellos and greetings both in Javanese and English-- every time I passed through the lobby.

In a different 'wordless' scenario, I found myself in a tiny village in northern Thailand. A friend told me in advance that the proper greeting was the traditional "wai" with hands held together, roughly at the same height as the bridge of the nose, in order to show respect. When I was introduced to the head of the village, my natural Canadian instinct took hold and I held out my hand to shake his hand. There was a second of hesitation before the head man shook hands and then did not want to let go! I found out later that any physical contact with other men is unusual and the western method of shaking hands is something that Thai elders were not accustomed to ... but were eager to experiment with! And yes, there is a psychology of shaking hands!

It is said that the hand shake originated in medieval times in Europe. When two men met, they held open their right hands to indicate that no weapons were present and then shook hands to complete the trust. In Colonial times in America, where the church was the binding force in society, families on homesteads or farms often met other people only once a week - at Church - and when they met, the novelty of men shaking hands with other men transferring the warmth of their hand to another (and vice versa) a relationship building exercise. Perhaps this was the original version of Facebook (Handbook?)

But, back to Thailand...the shaking of hands established a relationship with the village head - who then indicated to the others that I was a welcome visitor and the time I spent with the

villagers (I was the only Caucasian in town) was pleasant (everyone greeted me), funny (as they insisted I wear flip flops on my feet as I walked through deep, thick mud on my way to walking the cows to pasture), rewarding (for the smiles and the stories I could tell afterward) and meaningful (it was the start of my travels in South East Asia which eventually led to visits to every country in the region). Interesting what one handshake can do.

So, clients who are afraid of the language can be coached by You, their trusted global advisor. Base it on your own experience. Explain that speaking is a form of communication but not the only form and that , to quote the singing group Depeche Mode “People are people”, wherever you go.

Likewise, you don't have to speak the language to understand or be understood. Sometimes when you hear just that one word you have learned, you can discern pretty much what a conversation is about. Bob Dylan is quoted as saying “Sometimes it's not enough to know what things mean, sometimes you have to know what things don't mean”. In the context of travel, this is good advice that promotes a healthy attitude of curiosity, discovery, amicability, positivity and understanding.

And how does that word “boredom” creep into the equation? You can lose clients when they are bored with the destination they tell you they want to revisit year after year. They won't always articulate their dissatisfaction unless prompted by you. It's a never-ending circle. Their chosen destination becomes a security blanket and after a few visits it gets harder to wean themselves off the comfort of knowing the destination inside and out.

When they finally wake up and smell the coffee, and realize that they missed out on seeing other destinations, they may develop the dreaded “Travel Agent Messed Me Up” syndrome - where you get the blame.

Start by cross selling, to interest the family in similar venues in different destinations (a beach in Nassau instead of Montego Bay); then suggest upselling (how about a beach in Bali?); and then suggest switch selling; instead of going back to Epcot for the 10th time, why not visit one of the countries represented by the theme park. Then when the clients are hooked on variety and discovery, and with your language counselling skills in their travel tool kit, they can discover what over one billion others will do in 2013: that there is so much to see and do outside of one’s own borders. This is relationship building on a global scale.

Geoffrey Williams, a noted educator said “You can never understand one language until you can understand at least two”. The first language is your comfort zone language. The second, for travel professionals, comprises the many languages that your clients will encounter along their road to discovery.

It’s called GlobalSpeak, and whether it consists of verbal or non-verbal communication, it is a powerful method of interacting with the world as well as maintaining and retaining your clients by encouraging them to explore more.



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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