

The Let'er Buck Spirit

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WR 122, Fall 2019

Introduction

Code switching in regard to any customer service position is key to fully understanding exactly what a consumer's needs are and how to solve any issues that may present themselves. In 2007, Hope Jensen Schau, Stephanie Dellande, and Mary C. Gilly wrote an article, "The Impact of Code Switching on Service Encounters" arguing that there are "two different types of code switching suggested by sociolinguists: language and dialect" (Schau, Dellande, & Gilly, 2007). The authors then claim that in well-known organizations many employees are required to use a type of script, or a sequence of actions that define a well-known situation (Schau, Dellande, & Gilly, 2007) in order to efficiently move customers in and out of the store while making them feel as though they are important to the company. These employees use both language and dialect in order to efficiently communicate their specific script allowing for consumers to pick up on their company's lexis. In these large corporations, they may use specific language for certain items that pertain to their store. For example, Starbucks has certain language such as 'Frappuccino', that are registered to this organization. When a person goes to a smaller, local coffee shop, they may use this particular lexis which can lead to confusion by both

the employee and the customer. Oftentimes scripts work well for these large companies, as long as the customers do not have an out of the ordinary comment or concern, but for smaller businesses it can lead to confusion and frustration. Many times, “with brand code switching, the customer uses the brand terminology with which they are most familiar” (Schau, Dellande, & Gilly, 2007). When this happens, employees will refuse to break from their script allowing for customers to feel irritated and not fully understood. Another form of code switching often used in the service industry is the switching of languages, for example, English to Spanish, allowing for bilingual consumers to feel more comfortable speaking in their first language if they choose to do so. Similarly, switching dialect to a more casual tone through microculture or dialect codes such as regional vernacular or technology jargon (Schau, Dellande, & Gilly, 2007) is also very common in any type of service industry.

Although these particular types of code switching are relevant and practiced on a daily basis by all types of customer service employees, on a smaller scale, service workers may practice a more complex type of code switching. When communicating with consumers about issues they may have, it is key to code switch to a more professional tone of voice in order to efficiently show that they are respected and completely understood. By physically and verbally communicating this, any and all interactions should run much more smoothly. Verbally communicating respect can be difficult in many instances. That is where body language can play a large role in furthering this understanding between both parties. In a Johannes Marcelus Kraak and Jonas Holmqvist article titled, “The Authentic Service Employee: Service Employees’ Language use for

Authentic Service Experiences” they allow for the understanding that service employees always speak to the customer in a language where they can perceive the authenticity of the service (Kraak & Holmqvist, 2016) allowing for customers to feel important and as though they are a part of the current community. Studies have shown that employees with smiling faces and strong eye contact were related to customers’ willingness to revisit the store and were more enthusiastic to recommend the place of business to friends and family (Yuksel, 2008) allowing for larger percentages in sales and a higher rate of return. In small, local places of business with employees who are not all trained exactly the same and all come from various customer service backgrounds, it permits workers to code switch based on each individual customer and their needs instead of treating every customer that walks in exactly the same, lacking in individuality.

Code switching when speaking to individual customers is important to any successful business, but to have a much more effective organization, employees who are able to efficiently code switch from speaking to consumers versus coworkers permits for any association to greatly flourish. In Sandra L. Kirmeyer’s article titled, “Observed Communication in the Workplace: Content, Source, and Direction”, Kirmeyer explains the importance of communication in any place of business as well as the difference in communication styles. By using a more relaxed character it allows for the, “belief that one is cared for and supported, making employees feel as though they belong to this specific network” (Kirmeyer, 1988). It is not always easy to have suitable communication between coworkers, that is why code switching is key in this instance. When speaking to a coworker, oftentimes employees tend to use a more relaxed, low-key tone of voice. This

is especially true if the colleagues are considered to have a closer relationship to one another. It is also important to note that, “communication that is not work related may create opportunities for work-related communication, and vice versa” (Kirmeyer, 1988). By using a relaxed and more mainstream tone of voice, it allows for peers to feel as though they are more than strictly coworkers. It is important for associates to build friendships with one another because it allows for a better understanding of each other’s needs. When two peers have a close relationship in and out of the workplace it can lead to tasks getting finished without much verbal communication or explanation. When working in a high traffic environment, coworkers must have a great understanding of one another in order to efficiently complete any and all tasks.

Code switching is generally understood as the actual switch of languages to allow for better communication between bilingual consumers and employees, as well as keeping in the range of allowed lexis which consumers are often familiar with in large, more widely known corporations. Where research is ultimately lacking is that code switching can also be considered as the change in tone of voice. This allows for outsiders to know the level of comfort and respect the speaker may have, as does the changing of body language. For example, standing tall with shoulders back, making strong eye contact, physically communicates to the speaker that they are understood. Lastly, body language helps with communicating with persons of authority and efficiently showing that the authority figures, such as coworkers or managers, are respected and their opinions are valid and are entirely understood.

Ultimately, it is key to note the importance of code switching when speaking to consumers versus coworkers. Furthering this point, allowing for outsiders to see the impact of body language, tone of voice, and establishing authority that affects how others may see customer service employees and what kind of influence different lexis may have on each person which they are communicating with. Specifically, in the Pendleton Round-Up Association's retail store, retail associates have much experience working in high traffic areas and are willing to assist consumers in any way possible. Retail associates are almost painting on a slightly more assertive version of themselves in order to display enthusiasm towards each customer that walks into the store.

Method

The Pendleton Round-Up Association has been a large part of the community surrounding Pendleton, Oregon since 1910. Putting on a total of 109 rodeos as of 2019, in the second full week of September. Within this great organization, there are several different branches of service to allow this large corporation to fully flourish. Only two of the four separate branches strictly deal with customers on a daily basis: the ticketing and retail departments. For my research I decided to only focus on these two groups. Employees of these groups also have several years of customer service-related experience and know exactly how to handle any service-related issue that may come their way.

To begin with, I interviewed Nicole Herranen, the retail operations manager in person to allow for additional questions or comments throughout the conversation. I also spoke to Ameer Rueber, the assistant retail manager, and Bailey Kannier, a part time retail

associate to gather their thoughts on the issues above. Each of the previously mentioned employees were asked a series of questions and were asked specific follow up questions based on their answers. I conducted these interviews in an upstairs shared meeting room of the Pendleton Round-up Association's retail and ticketing store. During the interviews it was only the interviewee and I in the room, that way their answers would not be influenced or changed based on who else was in the surrounding area. I also made sure that none of the questions asked were leading and allowed for interviewees to come to their own conclusions.

Next, I emailed a series of very similar questions to Virginia Conner, a previous Pendleton Round-Up retail employee, who worked as a full-time retail associate during her time with the company. I also emailed Sarah Cunha who works as the assistant ticketing manager. Through this interview process I decided to make the questions open ended, allowing for much explanation and for each interviewee to fully expand their answers to the best of their ability. I decided to email these two employees because their schedules did not allow for an agreeable time to meet. These questions were much longer than the in-person interview questions and had several different parts per question, that were based off of their answers.

Lastly, I decided to observe each employee while interacting with various customers as well as their conversations with each of their coworkers throughout the day. I was watching for the way employees speak, keeping a close eye on changes in body language and noticing different tones used when speaking to specific people. I thought it would be an important aspect of the work environment to note because more

often than not, especially for customer service employees who have been working in the industry for many years, they do not realize when they change their tone to match the person they are speaking with. It is also difficult to notice different shifts in body language, when, for example, speaking to a coworker that one may see as the same level of authority versus when speaking to someone of much greater influence. In total, I conducted five different interviews and observed a full day of work for each employee mentioned above.

Results and Discussion

Lexis

To begin with, I spoke to Nicole Herranen, the retail operations manager of The Pendleton Round-Up Association. Herranen has 34 years of customer service experience; she would be considered the most knowledgeable in this field. She stated that while speaking to customers she uses a, “professional tone to be polite”, mentioning that, “it is important to make this interaction welcoming and informational”. Although the Round-Up Association’s retail store is on a much smaller scale than, for example, Starbucks, the retail associates still have go-to phrases they often use when speaking to customers in order to receive the information necessary to complete their interaction. Herranen said that she uses phrases such as, “are you looking for anything special?” or, “welcome to our store, is there anything we can help you find?”. Using words such as ‘we’, ‘our’, and ‘special’ allows the customer to feel as if they are a part of the local community, giving them the opportunity to feel a sense of belonging. Making sure the

customer understands that they are respected and that their needs will be met allows for returning consumers into the store and higher percentages in sales.

While conducting my research, I quickly realized that although having a script that an employee uses for every single customer can be ultimately damaging to the business's reputation, it is still important to have phrases that the employee knows will encourage conversation. By treating every customer with a mentality that their specific needs are different than the last, it allows for a more personalized interaction. Customers do not want to feel as though they are speaking to robots or that they are not looked at as an individual. By personalizing each conversation, employees will be able to improve their customer service skills greatly and this also creates room for greater sales and more enthusiastic consumers. Creating a comfortable space and making sure that customers know there is a level of mutual respect among each of the participating parties allows for a greater sense of community and makes the consumers have a greater connection to the company.

Tone of Voice

Next, I spoke with Virginia Conner, who has been involved with the Pendleton Round-Up Association for two years but has experience working in customer service beyond her time spent with the association. Conner worked in a local convenience store, Dave's Chevron, before her time spent with the association. A majority of her knowledge in customer service stems from this experience. While speaking with Conner, she mentioned the importance of changing the tone of her voice while communicating with consumers, making absolutely sure that she does not, "come off as baring or rude, rather

making sure that my tone of voice is welcoming and understanding about their (customers) wishes” by being exceptionally friendly and code switching to a more specialized attitude it immediately lets the consumers know that their needs are being taken seriously. When I asked Conner if she had any specific words or sentences that she often uses while speaking to customers, she said, “I wouldn’t say I have ‘go-to’ phrases, but I often use certain conversational openers to allow for me to get all of the necessary information to effectively assist customers”. When retail employees stick to a specific script it does not allow room for error or off script conversations. Having these off-script conversations can help the employee build a more friendly relationship with the consumer. Building different types of relationships with customers, allows for a higher rate of return. Allowing for relationships to flourish between consumers and employees can establish a sense of belonging and more personalized experience in the place of business. Once this relationship is established, employees can have a better understanding of the customer and their needs.

Changing one’s tone of voice, in any customer service position, allows for employees to gain the upper hand in conversations. By doing so it allows for consumers to gain a sense of respect and that they are allowed to efficiently communicate exactly what their needs may be. Although, staff needs to keep in mind that all consumers are very different, and their needs are different as well. Exceptionally skilled customer service employees are able to determine exactly what tone of voice to use in different types of situations. For example, with consumers who are frequent visitors of the establishment, employees may use a more relaxed tone because they are familiar with

the wishes of that particular consumer. By using this comfortable tone, it shows the regular customer that they are seen as being a part of this specific community and allows for the relationship between the consumer and employee to grow more with each visit. With new customers, employees use a much more formal tone to establish veneration and allow for the new customer to know where the influence lies. Employees may speak to every customer with a formal tone to begin with, just as one would do if they were meeting someone of importance for the first time. After a relationship has been recognized, then workers will code switch to a more familiar tone of voice showing the customer the type of relationship they may have with not only the employee who they are speaking to but the place of business as a whole.

Authority

As I observed the different kinds of coworker relationships in the Pendleton Round-Up retail store, I noticed several distinctive types of codeswitching, not only between coworkers but also between the different levels of authority. For example, when Ameer Rueber, the assistant retail manager, converses with Nicole Herranen, she uses a friendly but relaxed tone of voice and her body language suggests that she is comfortable yet still sees Herranen as someone of authority. Rueber's body language is relaxed, she is sitting in her desk chair with her shoulders forward, not necessarily making eye contact with Herranen while she is speaking, but her language is telling Herranen that she acknowledges what she is communicating. Although the two of them have spent time outside of the workplace, she still allows Herranen to feel that she respects her opinion on every decision while showing a sense of comfortability. When

Rueber speaks to someone of higher authority that she may not be as comfortable with, for example, the retail store director, Kevin Jordan, she stands up to greet him. Making eye contact, standing with her shoulders back, and allowing him to know that he has her undivided attention. In Atila Yuskel's article "Nonverbal Service Behavior and Customer's Affective Assessment" they argue that "positive expressions were found to be emotionally contagious, in that a smile produced congruent muscular activity in the observers face" (Yuksel, 2008) proving that when one approaches any conversation with a true, genuine display of happiness it allows to more trust to be built and a more positive outcome in any type of communication. Rueber's tone of voice suggests that she is speaking to someone of great authority and the utmost respect. The phrases she uses suggest the same thing, phrases such as, 'in your opinion', 'how do you think we should handle this?', or 'I completely agree'. Rueber codeswitches between speaking to each of them, showing her level of comfort and allowing for others to notice what type of work relationship she has with each of them.

In any type of workplace, whether it deals with customer service or not, showing a sense of authority while speaking to coworkers is extremely important. Similar to speaking with a customer, it allows for the participating parties to establish a mutual sense of respect. One can communicate this respect verbally but also with one's body language. Body language can be a large indicator in whether or not someone is truly paying attention to what the other person is communicating. By facing the person who is speaking, making eye contact, and not allowing any distractions to interfere with the conversation is just some of the many ways employees can show a sense of authority in

a work environment. Once a relationship is established, whether it is more friendly or one that the parties mutually decide to keep their relationship strictly professional determines what type of code switching is necessary. By building relationships and establishing authority where it is needed, businesses will likely flourish more than those who do not allow for personalized relationships to be built. Code switching from communicating with a more friendly coworker to one who is not as familiar with the speaking party, is key to any healthy organization.

Conclusion

In previous research, code switching is determined as the switching of languages, like English to Spanish, to allow for customers to feel more comfortable when communicating their needs. It is also noted that code switching, in large organizations, is the use of scripts or a set of specific words or phrases used in order to establish a consumer's wants. In this case however, it is important to see the different types of code switching that can take place in various types of work environments. Changing the tone of voice used while communicating with different consumers or coworkers allows for relationships to advance. Establishing a sense of community to customers and allowing them to feel connected to the place of business can allow for higher percentages in sales and rate of returns to increase. Code switching between consumers and coworkers is key to any successful organization. Being able to effectively communicate what needs to be done, how to handle it, and how to accurately determine needs of any conversation is important. When speaking to consumers, customer service employees will use a type of 'script', varying on the level in which their company is at. On a smaller scale, retail

associates will use specific phrases in order to receive necessary information while still establishing future relationships or continuing previously determined ones. This allows the customers to feel connected to the community in which the store is a part of. While speaking to coworkers or peers however, a customer service employee speaks in a more familiar tone and allows their body language to show a sense of comfort around a particular person. Although an employee will speak to persons of different authority in very different ways, they are capable of showing necessary respect in those given conversations.

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Appendix A

1. How long have you been involved with the Pendleton Round-Up Association?
2. How long have you worked in customer service?
3. Do you think you speak to customers in a different tone than you do your peers? If so, why do you think you do this?
4. Do you have any go to phrases or words when speaking to customers? If so, what?
5. Why do you use these phrases? How did you learn to use them?
6. Define the 'retail voice' in your own words:
7. If one of your coworkers spoke to you in the 'retail voice', would you consider it disrespectful? If so, why?
8. Do you think that your body language has an effect on the outcome of a conversation with customers?
9. Do you recognize that you use specific body language when communicating with customers? If so, what type of body language do you use?
10. Do you use a different type of body language when communicating with coworkers? How does it differ from the way you present yourself to customers?

Author Bio

Jenni Kannier is a junior at Western Oregon University studying Business with an emphasis in Marketing. She is also planning on minoring in Entrepreneurship. Jenni plans on exploring different countries, expanding her knowledge of other cultures post-graduation. After her exploration, she plans to open her own retail store in Central Oregon. In her free time Jenni enjoys practicing yoga and spending time outdoors.