Keeping your customer happy – it takes more than words
by Elizabeth Abbott, TechWriter

Summary

Being a good, or even great, writer is not enough any more. We live in the age of the consumer and, as the cliché goes "the customer is always right". However, my observation is that this is not always the practice or belief where technical communicators are concerned. At times, technical communicators act a bit like some in the medical profession – "we are the experts and know what is best for you." While this may be true, it does not necessarily translate into a satisfied customer.

For this talk I am going to assume that the quality of your work is high i.e. you know how to write well, use the tools and deliver the goods. These are necessary but not sufficient for customer satisfaction. I'm going to focus on the other (non-verbal) side of things. In this context I have identified three aspects to cover briefly. They are all substantial topics in their own right and merit further reading. The three topics are listening to what the customer wants, body language, and giving and receiving feedback. They are of course all linked and can work together for your benefit.

Listening to (and hearing) what the customer is saying/wants

A common complaint or comment that we receive from our clients is that a contractor is not listening to them. Most of the time I'm sure that the person is hearing the words but they are not changing their behavior or reacting in a way that assures the client that they have received the message. This may be deliberate because they disagree but don't want to argue or accidental in that they have misunderstood the intention or message the client was trying to get across. Clear and accurate communication is essential but often sadly lacking.

Here are some tips to optimize success from your side:
- Try to put yourself in the client's shoes. What do they need from you? What pressures are they under? Most important – how can you make them successful?
- Don't force your views on the client. Make sure you understand the context of the discussion – are they seeking your views or telling you?
- Practise active listening. Show that you received their message by repeating what you heard in your own words.
- Remember the customer is always right – don't argue.

Giving and receiving feedback

Most people consider this in the context of employee performance and generally as supervisor to worker but actually it applies in all sorts of areas. For example, how do you tell a co-worker to stop interrupting you by coming to your desk to talk or the manager that what they are asking you to do is impossible.   A good understanding of how to give feedback can be a great help in managing all sorts of awkward situations. On the receiving side, feedback is a gift as it is generally given by those who care and want to help.

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Tips for giving feedback

Do
- Be direct – it needs to be delivered person to person not via email.
- Be specific - get to the point and don't talk around the subject.
- Be personal – talk about how it is impacting you. Use terms like "I have noticed.." or " I have seen."
- Be timely but choose your time (especially for negative feedback).
- Be constructive. Constructive feedback is information-specific, issue-focused, and based on observations. It may be positive (a job well done) or negative (opportunity for improvement).
- Express appreciation for positive things and concern for negatives.
- Be sensitive to the goals of the other person.

Don't
- Put positive and negative feedback in a single sentence as in "John, you have worked hard on this project, but. . . ." Watch out for the words "but" "however" and "although" as what follows discounts the positive part of the message.
- Be emotional.
- Put in interpretation or implication, just stick to the facts.
- Don't compare them with others.
- Provide feedback to a boss unless they ask for it (and even then be very careful).

The bottom line is that sometimes giving direct feedback on a behavior is uncomfortable. It's uncomfortable for you and for the person receiving it. However, if you beat around the bush, try to avoid the person and just hope the behavior stops, e-mail the person only part of the story, or use other indirect tactics, you are doing yourself and them a disservice. The best way is to be mature, professional, and compassionate.

Tips for receiving feedback

It is important (but hard) to ask for feedback and welcome it. Your powers of self-perception are limited and understanding how others see you and your work can be immensely valuable. You will need to accept it in the spirit in which it is given. You also need to recognise how you feel when the feedback is not what you expected, especially if the provider breaks the rules above.

Do
- Be explicit – be clear what you are seeking (and what you are not interested in)
- Be attentive – concentrate fully and listen to what they are actually saying, not what you want to hear.
- Be aware **-** notice your reactions both intellectual and emotional. Don't reject feedback out of hand. You need to be aware of mis-perceptions and misapprehensions as these are things you need to deal with.
- Be silent – do not respond immediately. Don't be distracted by the need to explain (you can do this later); concentrate on the message the person is trying to give you.

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Remember you do have a choice about how to use the feedback you are given and you may choose to ignore some. One way of dealing with these situations is to thank the giver, explain the situation and ask if there is some other way to deal with their need.

Impact of body language

Again this is a topic in itself and in this short talk I can't really go into much detail. However I'd like to make a number of points and suggest some areas for follow-up if you are interested in learning more.

One of the don'ts mentioned above in the context of feedback refers to not inferring things on the basis of observations. However this is a very human trait and is happening whether we like it or not. When we, at TechWriter, ask for feedback on our contractors, often the comments relate to inferred attitudes largely based on observed behaviour rather than objective facts. There is plenty of research that shows how much weight people place on non-verbal cues especially if they are in conflict with what the person is saying.

There are two aspects to be considered here:

1. Interpreting what you see (or sending the message you want)
   - Using the standard cues, for example, nodding to signal that you are following what the person is saying
   - Being aware of cultural differences
   - Some technological solutions - Social x-ray specs.

2. Being aware of involuntary cues
   - gesture mirroring
   - variations in tone and pitch.

Tips

- Watch the body language of people you are dealing with and ensure you take it into account. If a customer/manager is giving all the signs of being bored, then perhaps they are.
- Be aware of the signals you are sending. It's okay if they are correct; if not, you need to do something. For example there are at least four interpretations of crossed arms from defensive to aggressive – which one is correct? Research has also shown that eyes are very important in supporting or undermining what you are saying.
- You can use feedback to check both 1 and 2.

Conclusion

It should be no surprise to this audience that good accurate communication matters. I hope that I have given you some ideas that it takes **more than words**.