Language and the Customer Experience

When was the last time you filled out a customer loyalty survey in another language? The answer is probably "never." English language hegemony is a result of the U.S. being the world's most dominant economic player, but coupled with the fortunate coincidence that the former dominating player, England, spoke the same language. With this dominance, we expected customers to learn English or we just did not care about them.

For companies to grow in today's economy, they have to depend upon the global markets; the non-English-speaking customer base can no longer be ignored. Increasingly, global markets drive corporate revenues and profits. It is no longer a "wait-and-see" agenda, where companies release a product domestically and then react to international demand. Today, companies ship international releases at or close to the same time as the domestic product. Thus, customer loyalty systems have to support diverse customer bases, driving the need to be available in localized versions for each market.

It is not that global customers cannot speak English – they do and usually speak it better than we speak their language. The problem is that non-localized communications to international customers are incredibly frustrating. Imagine if the Japanese manufacturer of your DVD player sent you a customer survey—in Japanese only. You would easily get the impression that the manufacturer cared only about the loyalty of customers in its home country. Certainly, this is not the message your company wants to deliver.

Language is a Primary Driver of the Customer Experience

We all get a chuckle from examples of bad translations from foreign languages to English. But, surprisingly, we rarely think about how we sound in a foreign culture. Translation is not the same thing as localization. Translation refers to taking the words of one language and transforming them to their equivalents into another language. Localization, on the other hand, takes the meaning of one language and transforms it into another language, giving the product the "look and feel" of the target market. The words may be altogether different, but the meaning is the same.

One way to demonstrate this is through idioms:

- English: "Like father, like son"
- Chinese (localized back-translation): "Lions do not breed dogs"

As you can see, while the words do not comply with the original English sentence, the meanings are equivalent.

When it comes to customer loyalty in other cultures, it is important to evaluate the message, not just in terms of words, but also for meaning and cultural sensitivity. How do we do that?

Enlist Your In-Country Reviewers

Many program managers enlist the assistance of their in-country reviewers only when it is time to review the translation for accuracy. But great benefit can be gained if you enlist them to evaluate the appropriateness of your message during the English creation stage. You might assume that the localization vendor takes responsibility for this, but, unless they are a division of your own company, this is unlikely. By the time you bring in a localization vendor, you likely developed most or all of your content. A localization vendor steps in to translate your English content accurately while ensuring your product has the look and feel of having been created for the target market. They turn to you and your in-country reviewers to help clarify your corporate culture when questions arise.

In-country reviewers are valuable in other ways. They can create reference materials that influence the style of the translations. Localization vendors love to get two things at the start of a project: glossaries and style guides. While localization vendors can create these materials for you, this increases cost. Since your in-country reviewers review the translations anyway, it helps streamline the process and reduce costs, if they develop the reference materials used by your localization vendor before translation begins.

Glossaries and Style Guides

A glossary contains a list of specialized words with their definitions and translations. It may include terms that should remain in English, as well as the preferred treatment of common industry acronyms and other specialized terminology. Style guides are similar to glossaries, but they also contain information on grammatical constructs and formatting requirements. Most importantly, they set the tone of your corporate message in other countries by defining how casual or formal the language should be.

Streamlining the Review Process

Most negative review comments are not the result of poor translation quality. The major issue is that the reviewers do not have input during the creation of the English content (such as the questions for the survey). Frustrated by this, reviewers often make changes in the translation that take the meaning to something you never intended. To avoid this, reviewers should participate early during the program creation stage, rather than later in the process. This allows the reviewer to feel included and paves the way for smooth translation and review phases.

Help your reviewers by training them on what you expect from them. When reviewing the translations, the reviewer's focus should be on adherence to glossaries and style guides, not stylistic preferences or changes to the meaning of the source content.

Finally, keep in mind that a good vendor can always schedule a conference call between the reviewer and the linguist. Establishing this relationship, even virtually, streamlines the translation process and creates a more harmonious relationship between reviewers, linguists, and project managers.

Conclusion

The Director of the Professional Services department from a major customer experience company pointed out that you can improve response rates by explaining to your customers the importance of their feedback:

Your message should be: "This is part of how we do business. This is how we ensure satisfaction among our customers. You are important to us, and so are your opinions and feedback."

This statement applies not only to increasing response rates, but also to improving your relationship with your global customer base and in-country staff. By choosing your words and concepts wisely, you enhance your localized communications and increase reviewer effectiveness and customer satisfaction.

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