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Be the Choice, Not the Obligation: Winning Champions of Interpreter Services Through Exceptional Customer Service

By Erin Rosales and Rashelle LeCaptain

Janet arrived at her interpreting assignment out of breath. She was not entirely sure she had found the correct department on the hospital campus, but she was late, so she walked up to the nurses' station and interrupted two nurses to ask if this was the oncology unit. It was, they confirmed. Janet asked if the doctor for the patient in room 714 was on the unit.

"I'm sorry," said one of the nurses, "Are you a family member of the patient?" Janet unclipped her ID badge from her pants pocket and held it up to the nurse saying, "No, I'm the interpreter, and the doctor is supposed to be here now."

So, what happened? What's wrong with the scenario above? After all, Janet is a very skilled and talented interpreter. She earned national certification, has 15 years of experience, and is an active member of local and national interpreting organizations. Unfortunately for Janet, despite her on-paper qualifica-

The person contacting the interpreter or contracting with an interpreter services provider has a choice.

tions, she has done little to inspire confidence, much less collegiality, with the nurses she encountered.

Then again, what does it matter as long as she is excellent at interpreting and holds the proper credentials? Well, it matters a great deal, and this is why: her livelihood depends on people wanting to work with her. The same is true for every interpreter. And the person contacting the interpreter or contracting with an interpreter services provider has a choice.

Poor Customer Service Reflects Poorly on the Entire Profession

There is always a choice. There is a choice to call another in-house interpreter or contract with a different company. There is a choice to work begrudgingly with whatever interpreter

shows up. Even if there is only one interpreter on the planet with a particular language pair, there is even a choice *not to request an interpreter*. In most cases in the health care sector, health care providers are required by law (under Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act or Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964) to provide interpreters to patients when needed. Still, there are many instances where interpreting services are not being provided in health care facilities, regardless of whether or not it is legally required.

The bottom line is that there are consequences associated with providing (or not providing) an interpreter—sometimes negative consequences. For the self-employed interpreter it might mean less consistency and frequency of work assign- ➔

ments. For an in-house interpreter it might mean poor performance reviews. For the health care institution it might mean being exposed to risk associated with opting to work with more pleasant, but less skilled interpreters, or opting not to hire an interpreter. At the other extreme, choosing to work with the *right* interpreter often results in favorable consequences: increased work opportunities, positive performance reviews and longevity with the employer, and improved interpreting services provided at the health care facility. So, we need to do all we can to make a favorable impression, both in terms of how we present ourselves professionally and how we carry out our duties, to ensure that people make the right choice every time. Do not give people a reason not to hire an interpreter. Make it a decision they should not have to think twice about.

Excellent Customer Service Is No Guarantee, But It Helps

Does providing excellent customer service guarantee that interpreters will never lose clients or have complaints filed against them? Perhaps not. However, eventually the people responsible for making the decision about which interpreter to call, which company to contract with, or whether or not they will make the effort to contact an interpreter at all will be faced with a choice. The interpreter in the crosshairs might not be Janet, but it might be you or your organization. If these decision-makers are going to choose an option that leads away from you, do not let it be because you have a reputation for being unprofessional. Excellent customer service (which includes conducting yourself in a professional manner at all times) will help them choose wisely.

So, how do you *make* people want to work with you? The answer is, you cannot. You can, however, *inspire* people to *want* to work with you. (Now, there is a thought!)

There are many different ways for interpreters to inspire others to want to work with them. Focusing on

Inspire people to move away from an attitude of having an obligation to work with an interpreter toward an attitude of having a desire to work with one.

Janet's scenario as an example, there are several things she could have done differently to create a better impression and make her interaction with the nurses more positive. Here are just a few suggestions:

Arrive on Time: Interpreters must not be causal about their assignment arrival times. Every effort should be made to arrive on time. That said, there might have been a very good reason why Janet was running late. Perhaps her previous assignment ran long at the last minute (e.g., a patient had an allergic reaction to a vaccination administered at the end of the previous appointment). When this happens, at least acknowledge and explain the tardiness. If possible, inform the unit ahead of time or coordinate for another interpreter to cover the assignment. These things can go a long way toward maintaining a positive impression of you and even of interpreters in general.

Be Tactful at All Times: A day in the life of a medical interpreter is frequently chaotic and unpredictable. It is easy to get caught up in the stress of it all. However, interpreters are constantly interacting with others who also experience chaotic and unpredictable days, not to mention having their own unique priorities, concerns, and interests. Instead of interrupting the nurses abruptly, Janet should have opened with a gentle phrase or nonverbal gesture to catch the nurses' attention. Opening with an "excuse me," "pardon me," or "sorry to interrupt" would have been a more tactful way for Janet to make her presence known.

Identify Yourself First: Before asking the nurses to provide her with any information, Janet should have introduced herself by stating her name and her position. She also should have worn her ID badge in a place that would have been easy for the nurses to see. The nurses should not have been put on guard because they could not readily identify Janet as part of the medical team, possibly wondering if they would soon need to call in a "code green." Get the introductions out of the way first so individuals are not put on the spot.

Have a Strategy for Professional Interactions

In addition to the things Janet could have done differently, there are other ways for interpreters to be intentional and strategic about day-to-day interactions with others.

Learn Names: Make an effort to learn the names of the members of the medical team and other staff members. It is not sufficient to know only the name of the physician and the patient. Learning names, and addressing people in their preferred manner, is a way of demonstrating to individuals that they matter. And they do matter, even if they do not sign your paycheck.

Be Perceptive: Be aware of the needs of others you encounter and help out when and how you can. It might not be possible (a.k.a. ethical) for you to dress a patient's wound, but you can hold a door open or direct lost individuals to an information desk.

Do not give people a reason
not to hire an interpreter.

Be Pleasant: There are lots of ways to be pleasant. Smiling at appropriate times, acknowledging people you pass in the hallway, wishing people a good day, and thanking others for their service to you are just a few examples. These things might not seem like a big deal to you, but to someone who is immersed in stress constantly, these actions can be a welcome and much needed balm.

Occasionally, there will be opportunities to make a grand gesture and really impress those with whom you work. More often than not, the day-to-day grind will present a few small opportunities for you to leave a lasting positive impression. Keep your eyes open for these moments and seize them when you can.

Make Them Sing Your Praises

All of these things boil down to

providing exceptional customer service to the people you encounter during your professional interactions. Doing these things a few times will allow you to make a small difference in the moment. Doing these things consistently and over a period of time just might inspire people to become champions and cheerleaders of the services you provide. Positive interactions reflect favorably on the entire profession.

So, by all means continue to develop the skills that make you a strong interpreter, but do not neglect the importance of delivering exceptional customer service as well. Use both skill sets to inspire people to move away from an attitude of having an *obligation* to work with an interpreter toward an attitude of having a *desire* to work with one. Hopefully, that *one* will be you. ■

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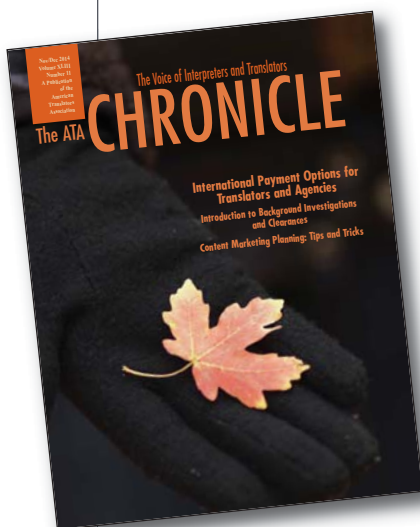


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