

Flying on Autopilot, Ritualized Communication

Terry Beard

Robotic, ritualized speech/communication patterns serve to create stilted, impersonal dialogue at home, at work, and at play. So often we meet up with friends, family and service people in retail establishments who begin dialogue with canned phrases like “How’s your day going so far?” or “How are you?”, well meaning but trite and semi-intrusive.

In the retail space, there seems to be a great deal of disconnect about what constitutes a great customer service experience, between the shop clerks attitude towards the customer and an attempt at good customer relations. Whether we are in a coffee shop, talking with someone in a call center or retail store, we need to bob and weave through a gauntlet of behavior patterns which sets us up to be on the receiving end of an onslaught of ritualized communication.

We are in a civility service war, and many of us are completely unaware of the fact that we are on a battlefield being waged by the words we

speak. The buyer-seller service war is driven by ritualized communication, by poor customer relations training, and the lack of civility from the customers. The majority of us, when we communicate too often, fly on automatic-pilot. We do not stop to think about the words we speak, their intonation, and the impact on others. The shop clerks and the customers do not pause to think about the impact of their words. As a result, the war is spiraling down the spirit levels of everyone’s expectations. Our society is continually flying to lower altitudes of appreciation and gratitude. All of which is driven by all of us accepting lower levels of communication standards and expectations in our transactions.

For years I’ve started my day at the local coffee shop. Upon arrival, when it becomes my turn, I ask, “May I have a tall double-cupped medium roast, please?” After placing my java order, I observe and hear the cacophony of commotion and attitude which creates the ambiance for me and the queue of folks waiting for their special drinks. As I wait for my freshly-brewed java, I muster up the courage to do mental martial arts with the coffee shop staff, invariably, as a-time filler between ordering my java and the time to exit the shop. I wait, it will come, a question or two about my personal life.

One must be on guard and prepared to have their emotional temperature taken. “How is your day going so far?” I respond, “Excellent.”



Being asked at 6AM by the coffee clerks and the baristas ‘how my day is going so far’ is a ritualized question which seldom takes me by surprise. I respond consciously with my ritualized response, “great.” This curt snippet sizes up to their ritualized, seemingly caring question. Now we are even. It might be nice to hear from the baristas, “What can I get for you today”, or “thanks for coming in, and how may I help you.”

Someone who doesn’t even know me asks, “What are your plans today?” “Do you have any plans for the week-end?” This small talk meant to warm up the exchange of pleasantries seems so innocuous and kind until the person whom I don’t know makes a comment or two about what I’ve shared with them in response to their question.

Mr. Coffee, you have the power to change this country’s culture with your army of employees. Work begins at home. Why do I continue to frequent your shops? The coffee is good, but the service is spotty. I also want to live long enough to hear. “Thanks for coming in today, we really appreciate your business.” Genuine, unscripted, welcoming offerings.

In America we are experiencing the era of too much ritualized dialog. We need to get real and relate to each other as real people rather than by canned scripting which is stilted and lacking in warmth. What’s the matter with baristas saying, “Good morning, what can I help you with this morning?” If we want to tell them how our day is going – fine. But sometimes, we just don’t want our temperature taken; we just want a hot cup of coffee. Baristas are coffee makers not psychotherapists. Let’s cut the ritualized yak, yak and talk like real people, not like mechanized, scripted coffee machines. I’d rather not rant. But two bucks for a 50 cent cup of coffee demands customer service at the highest of levels.



These interactions with others in the shops and stores that we frequent may well serve to remind us daily of the importance of the words which we speak and the fact that we should not be flying on auto-pilot. Our words have impact.

Michael Notaro, Past International President, summed up my point succinctly “Words count and ideas matter. What you say and how you say it is simply too important to leave to chance. What you say and how you say it determines whether ideas flourish, die or live to fight another day. What you say and how you say it shapes your hopes, your dreams and yes, even your destiny.”

The real test of how we communicate with one another is stopping to ask ourselves the question. Did I feel good when I left that exchange with another person with a yummy after taste or was the give-get so-so, and not so tasty?

Terry Beard initially joined Arlington Club Toastmasters in 2001. He co-founded Portland Rotary Toastmasters in 2015.

Terry is the author of Squelched - Succeeding in Business and Life by Finding Your Voice, published in 2017 and available on Amazon.com.