



# SPEAK THE CUSTOMER'S LANGUAGE

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COMMUNICATION IS NOT the straightforward process people often imagine. Although we tend to believe that communication is a linear process (someone says something, the other person hears it, the message got through) it is rarely that simple. Apart from the obvious problems of misunderstanding, mishearing, only getting part of the message, and so forth, there is the problem that people interpret messages in the light of previous experience.

Speaking the customer's language means more than just using the right words—people interpret everything by considering the source as well. Framing the communication in a way people can relate to is an essential part of designing a communication—but it isn't always easy to do.

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## The idea

The British Department of Transport found that around 55 teenage pedestrians a week were involved in accidents on the roads, usually caused by inattention—crossing the road while texting, filming each other on cellphones, and so forth. Research showed that teenagers consistently overestimate their capabilities as road users, and also they receive so many messages about safety and health issues they screen most of them out (especially messages from the government). The only messages that get through are those that they feel touch them personally.

With this in mind, the Department produced an advertisement that appeared to have been filmed through a cellphone camera, showing teenagers laughing in the street: the camera follows one youth as he

dances out into the road and is hit by a car. The strapline says “55 teenagers a week wish they’d given the road their full attention.” The ad was not created by professional movie-makers: to gain footage, the Department simply gave 14 groups of teenagers a cellphone camera and asked them to film their usual activities. The group used in the advertisement is an actual group of friends (from Stoke Newington in London) and only the final crash scene is performed by a stunt driver and stunt artist.

By using the kind of imagery teenagers use themselves, the advertisements were hard-hitting without being patronizing: the campaign got the message through. In post-tests following the ad being screened in movie theaters and on TV, 79 percent of respondents remembered the ad in a prompted recall, 95 percent said it made them rethink their attitudes to road safety, and 93 percent said it made them realize it could happen again. In the year following the ad, accidents involving teenagers fell by 10 percent.

By avoiding the patronizing “Hey, kids, road safety is cool!” type of approach, the Department produced a highly successful campaign.

## **In practice**

- Don’t try to guess what the target audience’s language is—let them tell you.
- People don’t like to be patronized—don’t talk down to your audience.
- Remember that people think about communications, and take the source into account.
- Communication is not a linear process—you cannot assume that because you sent a message, and the other person received it, that the information has been correctly transferred.