Using Audience Analysis to Anticipate Customer Needs

Why should a customer service agent understand audience analysis? Audience analysis is simply the process of understanding the traits of the people who may buy your employer’s products or services. The goal of audience analysis is to help you communicate more effectively with those people. Do not confuse audience analysis with market segmentation, however. Market segmentation focuses on how customers’ attitudes and behaviors influence their buying habits – this concept will be covered in the next subunit. Audience analysis focuses on customer traits that should influence how you communicate with them. Market segmentation is a tool used by sales people, a role you may have to play as a customer service agent. On the other hand, audience analysis is a tool that should be used by everyone who speaks or writes to others.

Here is a scenario that might help you understand the value of audience analysis: A young couple enters the hardware store where you work. The woman is pushing an infant in a stroller and the man is holding the hand of a toddler. The young man, who speaks haltingly and with a strong accent, informs you that he needs to keep his son out of his office while he is working. The woman does not speak, tending to the infant’s needs instead of joining the conversation. Meanwhile, your job is not only to help the couple make a purchase, but also to make them feel welcome in the store, buy what suits them best, and leave with a good feeling about the encounter so that they will return again if the need arises.

Based on what you observe, what can you assume about this couple, and how or what you should communicate to them?

- Because they are young and their children are very young, they are most likely not very experienced parents. This assumption may enable you to recommend more than just the child gate that would solve their problem. For example, you might also recommend electric outlet covers and base cabinet door locks.

- Because the woman is not engaged in the conversation, the father speaks for the family; however, because of the way he speaks, it is clear he is not a native speaker. You will need to pay attention to the man’s nonverbal as well as verbal reactions as you speak to him. He may show signs of confusion, which could signal that you need to slow down or simplify your speech. You may also need to pause frequently to give him opportunities to ask questions.

- Because they also have an infant who will eventually start crawling around their home, they need a product that will be safe for the infant as well as effective with the toddler. The customers may appreciate your attention to this detail, especially if it enables you to point out aspects of child gates that can be hazardous to crawling infants.
Audience analysis should be a careful, unbiased process that is based on what you observe combined with your knowledge of audience traits that may influence how you communicate. Good audience analysis avoids making assumptions about things that are not apparent, such as a customer’s attitudes or behaviors. Audience analysis should also heighten your awareness of how making assumptions can have a negative impact on communication. For example, using the previous scenario, what should you NOT assume about how you should communicate with the couple?

- Because the man speaks haltingly and with an accent, he will be unable to understand you if you use long sentences or try to discuss complicated ideas. *Being less fluent with a language does not mean that a person does not understand it when it is spoken – only that he does not himself speak it smoothly. In the scenario, if the young man may not understand you, make sure you are speaking clearly, but leave it up to him to ask for clarification. Definitely do not risk offending him by treating him as though he is unintelligent.*

- Because the woman does not speak, you should ignore her. *The woman may be only temporarily disengaged from the conversation. If you ignore her, you may miss the opportunity to make her feel welcome and valued, even if you do so only through nonverbal communication – eye contact, smiling, body positioning, etc.*

- Because the young man does not identify exactly what they need, he does not know what they need. *The man may know what they need, but he may not know the name of it because his knowledge of your language lacks a sufficient vocabulary. An appropriate response to this possibility would be to provide that vocabulary along with an explanation or definition, such as, “Do you mean a child gate – something that will block your son from entering the room?”*

- Because the toddler gets into his father's office without his father's knowledge, they are negligent parents. *Judging customers serves no purpose in customer service. You should stay focused on audience traits which you can observe directly and which help you communicate more effectively.*

Lastly, realize that audience analysis does not occur only when you are observing customers. You can become more familiar with the communication needs of your customers by asking experienced coworkers or your manager about the people you are likely to encounter. You will also improve your ability to analyze customers by simply gaining more experience in your job. Overall, however, as long as you remember that customers are also audiences, chances are that you will always be conscious of and conscientious about how you communicate with them.