

TORONTO BUSINESS TIMES

Making first impressions count

Bonnie Gross teaches people to speak to be understood

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Feb. 27, 2007

The universal truth, 'You never get a second chance to make a first impression' is no more true, perhaps, than when talking about a person's manner of speech - especially in business.

Bonnie Gross has been a speech language pathologist for 30 years. She's also the president and founder of Speech Science, a company dedicated to helping individuals and companies improve their communication skills. Gross said that she has found in today's business world that good language skills are essential to success.

"Speaking skills are vital to business," Gross said. "Let's say, for example, it's a competitive marketplace, which it is, and there are two people (who) are being interviewed for a job ... the person with the best speaking, and also writing or other communication skills, is going to get the job if, ultimately at the end of the day, they both have the same qualifications."

Gross said that today's employers look at an individual's speaking abilities in terms of how they will represent themselves and the business in their dealings with clients and other employees. As a result, prospective employers have shifted more scrutiny onto speaking skills. This is especially true, Gross said, when talking about the proliferation of call centres in business.

"With call centres the whole thing is the way you speak," she said. "That's the whole purpose of the job."

And Gross would know. She has worked with some of the biggest. Her client list includes such names as TD Canada Trust and IBM. Gross said that when dealing with complicated subjects such as personal finances or technology, clear, concise and understandable English is a must. This is where Gross' courses on accent reduction come into play. She actually finds that most people she works with know English fluently, but require assistance with pronunciation, rhythm and intonation so others can understand them better.

"I did a big job for a call centre at TD Bank and this is more challenging because not only do their people have to be clear, but for everyone in the group English was not the first language," Gross said. "In a call centre there is no eye contact, no facial expression, no smile, no hand shake and all of that has to come through your voice on the phone, so clarity is really important."

Gross also does a lot of accent reduction courses for employees at IBM call centres.

"That's a situation where people are talking to large companies and individuals about computers," she said. "The general population doesn't know anything about technology in the first place, so they need somebody to explain it to them or talk about it, not only in clear English, but clear words and expressions that make the client feel comfortable."

Gross' work isn't limited to helping people reduce accents. She also gets many people who have spoken English their whole lives who simply want to improve their speaking skills or become better motivational or public speakers. Some even want to master the delicate art of conversation. Gross and her small yet dedicated team work with clients to identify what they need help with.

"I think what's really important is for me to evaluate what it is that person needs and what their strengths and weaknesses are," she said. "Some people are really good in front of a crowd, but they can't network or they're nervous or they're shy and it has nothing to do with accent. They just don't have those tools."

Rui Alves is a Toronto-based lawyer who has worked with Gross on his speaking skills. He has primarily taken the course titled Confident Conversation, and he still attends courses about once a month. One of his colleagues suggested the course to him and Alves said he has seen a real improvement in the way he speaks.

"One of the partners here at the firm thought that I could benefit from the program in terms of my overall speaking ability and to avoid mumbling or nervousness when I speak," Alves said. "It's helped me to become more comfortable speaking and to come across as more assertive and to improve the tone of my voice."

Alves said people have noticed a real change since he started the courses a year and a half ago. He said he is pleased that he has reduced the hesitation and mumbling in his speaking and also his habit of ending sentences on a higher note than he started. He said doing so made him sound unsure of what he was saying at times, which wasn't helpful in his profession.

"(The course) helps me in (a work) context as well and I'm trying to use some of the intonation techniques and to come across more clearly," he said. "Generally, the course has made me become more aware of certain things."

Siddarth Apaya immigrated to Canada from India and today he works as an assistant marketing manager with General Mills. He found out about Gross' courses while completing his education at the Ivey School of Business in Toronto.

"I could speak English very well and I think my pronunciation was OK," Apaya said. "The main reason I thought that this was a good opportunity is because when you get into the corporate world over here you definitely want to communicate well."

Apaya said that he took the courses for about six months and that a lot of the international students at his school also attended. In his opinion, the classes weren't even about learning better English, but rather clearer English.

"I don't think that Bonnie's programs are about speaking better," he said. "It's about being understood better."

This is a sentiment that Gross agrees with. Even though she has many courses that deal with accent reduction she wants to make clear that she has no interest in accent elimination.

"I tell people that I don't think you should lose your accent," Gross said. "If you want I can help you, but I think an accent is something to be proud of, it's part of your heritage and it's part of who you are."