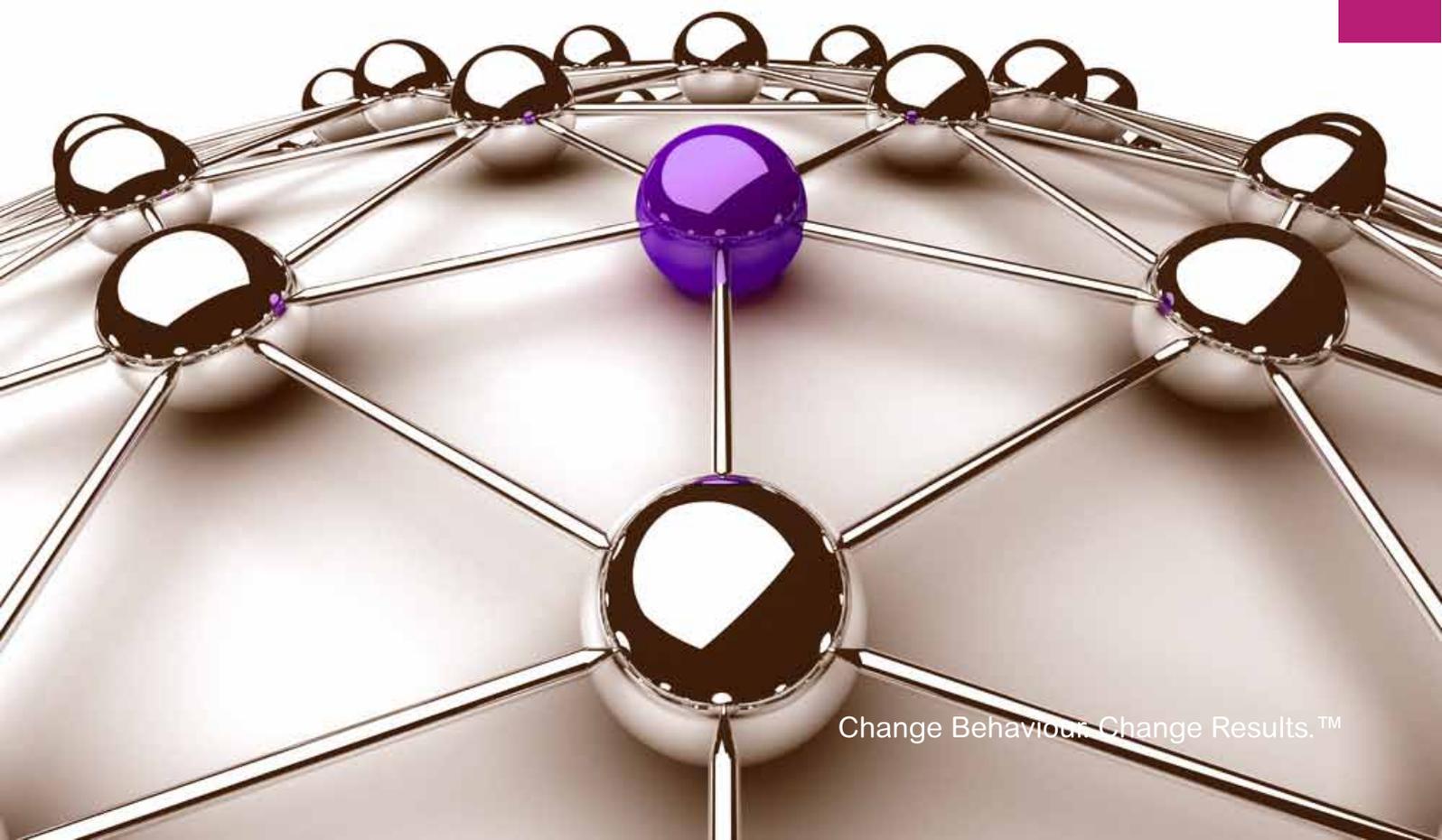


Vertex – Spreading the word



The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, is credited with a great deal of how we think about communication in the 21st Century. Through a very simple model he managed to explain why any word is unlikely to mean the exact same thing to two different people.

On a very basic level, the word 'car' may conjure up an image in your mind of a Jaguar in British Racing Green yet someone else will see a black Ford. The explanation for the difference in what words signify can be found in an individual's life experiences; the car they drive, what their parents drove in the past, recent advertising they have seen, their favourite colour. The list of possible influences is endless.

Bearing this basic description of semiotics in mind, we're able to appreciate why people can sometimes misinterpret what is, on the surface, quite a simple communication. So what are the implications on business, when success relies on effective communication? This is a question that Vertex, a company that is in the business of managing their clients' customer relationships, found itself asking while working with Huthwaite earlier this year.

Vertex is an international business process outsourcer (BPO) – a very complex business. It is based in Manchester, employs over 9,000 people globally, and is a part of United Utilities plc, a FTSE 100

company. Vertex's particular expertise lies in customer management. It develops and implements a range of business process outsourcing services, including call centres, billing and accounting payment processing, and HR outsourcing for commercial businesses, utilities companies and public sector bodies. Organisations such as Westminster City Council, Powergen and Marks and Spencer trust Vertex to run the dialogue and contact with their customers, which can include anything from making outbound telemarketing calls, and receiving incoming calls for enquiries, orders and payments, to sending out bills.

Although trusted within an impressive client base, Vertex was looking to improve its new business conversion rate. Bidding in the BPO marketplace is very expensive, costing an average of £50,000 per bid, but sometimes rising to £250,000 and beyond. So unsuccessful bids are very costly indeed. And with a bid-to-business win ratio of 4.5:1 the company gave itself the objective of becoming world-class in business development. Vertex realised that in order to achieve this, it needed to follow

a world-class methodology. So, after searching the markets for a partner that could offer a research-based, globally available solution, Vertex chose Huthwaite to help them.

Huthwaite consultant, Dominic France-Lynch, provided a solution to reflect Vertex's real-world. This meant developing the behavioural and strategic selling skills of everyone who has an impact on sales whilst helping to refine the processes in marketing to bring them into line. The solution needed to be flexible and robust. Flexible enough to address the different needs of the many roles within an account team – from the business development manager to marketing. And robust enough to ensure that the whole team could 'talk the same talk' particularly given the high cost of the bid process itself. So France-Lynch included the provision of diagnostic, analytical and planning tools with which to develop a common language, to allow for the streamlining of processes and the development of common skills and procedures within and between the two departments.

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Many of Huthwaite’s models and tools were adopted by Vertex and at the same time the company made the decision to merge marketing and sales to work together as the business development team. But the change didn’t stop here, as Helen Staniszewski, sales & marketing operations director of Vertex, explains. *“In account management in particular, a department that is growing quickly thanks to lots of new business wins, people started using the language that Huthwaite had introduced in various aspects of their work, including account plans. This meant that people in other parts of Vertex were being exposed to this language without really understanding it.”*

Although much of the language was filtering through the company, Vertex and Huthwaite decided that, as managing clients’ customer relationships depends on effective communication, the room for interpretation was too great, and that they would combat any potential problems before they arose by introducing familiarisation courses for

everyone within the wider business support teams, including operations, finance, legal, and IT.

This on-going process has been useful in harmonising the various cultures within Vertex. For instance, Vertex recently acquired UK contact centre operator, 7C, and the shareholding of 7C India. The cultures between the two companies differed in as much as while Vertex is from a utilities background, 7C has always been very entrepreneurial in spirit. Standardising language has helped create a common understanding and bring the cultures in line.

With sales cycles often lasting over six months, in many respects it’s too early to see real results at this stage. But, according to Staniszewski, some positive effects are already visible. *“Our experience with Huthwaite has been excellent. It has gone beyond the initial programme, with people in Vertex now saying, ‘I think Huthwaite can help us with this’, in areas that are often completely outside the original remit of what I could only*

describe as a worldclass sales excellence programme, the familiarisation courses being a good example.”

France-Lynch comments, *“I’ve witnessed a fundamental change in the way the team approaches the bid process. They are now far more customer focused. Specifically, they take time to consider not only ‘how attractive is this client to Vertex?’ but more importantly ‘how attractive do we appear to the client?’ which is, after all, the judgement that really matters. I’m sure this will help to bring about the desired change in results”.* And when asked how she expects Huthwaite to impact on Vertex’s bottom line, Staniszewski replies, *“It’s a very tough target, but given this change in emphasis, we’re expecting to cut bid conversion rates from 4.5:1 down to 3:1 in some sectors and even 2:1 in others”.*

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