

Leave It in the Box by the Door

By Ruann L. Wood

The virtual box by the door is for everyone and anyone who calls themselves an interpreter, whether it be an American Sign Language interpreter or a spoken language interpreter. This article will provide a few pointers on how to ensure that the interpretation provided, from the client and customer perspective, is void of interpreter bias.

In one activity that took place in my eighth grade English class back in the 1980's, the teacher had the class analyze various Beatles' songs for obvious and hidden meanings. In the tune *Eleanor Riggs*—not the most uplifting and inspirational song ever written—there is a line that says, “Eleanor Riggs, wearing a face that she keeps in a jar by the door....” The meaning of this line, if flexed ever so slightly, fits the profession of interpreting perfectly and that will become clear in a moment.

Imagine a virtual box. Each interpreter chooses the color and size of the virtual box. This box is placed by the door of every interpreting assignment that an interpreter walks into. The box must have the capacity to contain all biases that an interpreter has on any given topic, against any given speaker, against any given host entity, against any given individual receiving the interpretation, as well as any bias against the team interpreter, if there is one. Biases can include morals, values, traditions, beliefs, political viewpoints and opinions of all shapes and sizes. All of the above are taboo in any interpreted setting and should be left in the virtual box by the door.

The interpreter who consciously decides to leave all biases in the virtual box by the door stands prepared to enter as a neutral party and remain as such throughout the process, thus minimizing any effect on the parties needing the communication facilitation. Doing this allows the client receiving the interpretation to establish his or her own bias and make decisions about the information conveyed, presented or shared.

Now, don't close the lid on the box yet. The box is not full.

Bad days, to include bad hair days, wardrobe disasters, not enough coffee, and traffic woes as well as bad moods from family tiffs and financial strain must also be placed or thrown, if the day is truly bad, into the virtual box by the door. These also have no place in an interpreted setting as they are sure to negatively affect everyone and the interpretation. As much as interpreters believe that it is possible to mask these, they inevitably surface during casual conversation, during wait times, during break times. Remember that one person's bad day has

the ability to taint the day of everyone else around.

The last item to drop in the virtual box by the door is, well, technology. Cell phones, smart phones and PDAs are a distraction to any interpreter. Checking email and text messages while being paid to perform an interpreting assignment is unprofessional. Such behavior influences the client's view of the interpreter as well as the customer's view, which ultimately taints the view of the company providing the service.

How is it possible to leave technology in the *virtual* box by the door? Create an “at work” setting for the device. The “at work” setting does not ring and does not vibrate, thus removing any chance for the personal attention of the interpreter in the setting to decrease. This is a new habit that must be formed to replace the bad habit of feeling the need to be connected at all times.

What about Eleanor Riggs and the face that she keeps in a jar by the door? Well, that is what the interpreter should **pick up** after dropping all the biases, bad days and technology in the box. Every virtual box contains a jar that includes a smile, a friendly hello along with a handshake or hug (depending on the client, culture, and setting) and a positive attitude. The happy face may not represent how the interpreter feels, but it is what is necessary and appropriate for the setting. The client and customer deserve a friendly, professional interpreter who is there to get the job done with excellence.

At this point the virtual box is closed. The interpreter walks into the setting and performs the job they have been hired to do, remaining neutral and not distracted.

When the assignment is over, while in the process of leaving, go back to the virtual box and pull out the items that cannot be lived without. All the rest, well, consider lightening the load by leaving those behind in the box by the door. In exchange, feel free to keep the friendly,



happy face from the jar that was in the virtual box by the door. It is less to carry around and, upon arrival at the next assignment, there isn't much left to leave in that virtual box by the door. ■

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