



EXAMINER'S REPORT

MAY 2009

COMMUNICATION SKILLS Certificate in Marketing Skills

General Comments:

Based on academic research and established principles, the *Communication Skills* module seeks to provide students with the requisite skills to become effective communicators. While the level, style and format of the questions in the May 2009 exam were consistent with previous papers, candidates' performance was mediocre on the whole. A significant number tended to answer questions based on opinion rather than applying relevant concepts/theories. As mentioned in previous examiners' reports, there is definitely a problem when answers could have been written by someone who never participated in the Communication Skills programme.

There was also evidence of a lack of exam preparation, and a number of candidates wrote more on questions which were worth few marks (and vice-versa). Obviously, the best way to achieve exam success is to prepare thoroughly. It also helps to know how to answer the questions effectively. To pass the exam, candidates need to *apply* the concepts, using examples and/or incorporating their work and own experience to reinforce their argument. Where appropriate, include examples or references to material from the programme. Examples demonstrate your grasp of the subject matter and help illustrate your point.

Finally, the overall grasp and command of English needs attention, particularly in relation to sentence construction, grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Question 1 - Case Study – 5 Star Hotel Cancellation.

This year's mini-case study, carrying 50% of the marks, focuses on a very practical aspect of communication skills – handling customer complaints.

The case study centers on an account executive, Paul, of a 5-star hotel who confirms an appointment to see the conference chairman of a major medical association to finalize details of its annual conference, but fails to attend the meeting. A tentative booking for the next two years is cancelled, and a complaint letter is sent to the hotel's general manager. Students were asked what Paul should do to appease the complaining customer, how to counteract bad publicity relating to the event, and what the general manager should do to rectify the situation. On the whole, the majority of students treated this as a general question rather than basing their answer on Unit 6, which deals specifically with customer complaints.

In the first part of the question, most students identified some of the essential steps to deal with customer complaints. However, stronger answers explored how companies should regard complaints as a "gift", and how the handling of a complaint is a key "moment of truth" for many customers. Stronger answers also commented on the procedure for "dealing with difficult customers".

In relation to the second part of the question, stronger answers focused on the need to apologise for the mistake, a promise to rectify the situation immediately, and other procedures to resolve the problem. One candidate suggesting offering the journalist an all expenses paid vacation package to “smooth” over the problem, which is clearly unethical and unacceptable.

The final part of the question gives the student the opportunity to illustrate that when complaints are handled well, the customer’s view of the organisation can actually improve. When the complaint is handled poorly, the customer will stop doing business with you and tell everyone else they know about their bad experience. Effective managers know it costs five times more to win a new customer than to keep an existing one. Stronger answers acknowledged these approaches to customer complaints.

Question 2

Here, students were asked to outline the preparations required to pitch an innovative new product to a group of prospective clients. Candidates were required to explain the role of research in preparation for the oral presentation and comment on the role of body language. Students who did well in this question described how well-prepared presentations lead to confident delivery, and discussed the relevance of posture, eye contact and voice. Students who scored higher marks explored the importance of audience analysis and a clearly defined purpose, as well as the role of environment, content and visuals.

Question 3

Students were asked to apply the communications process model to an advertising campaign of their choice (as per Unit 3). Students who did well in this question used an appropriate campaign to illustrate how messages are carried between the sender and the receiver, and how true communication only occurs when the receiver decodes the message exactly as the sender intended them to. These students also did a good job of describing the process from the point of view of potential misunderstandings or communication breakdowns. Students who did not do well in this question chose ‘campaigns’ that inadequately illustrated their understanding of the key elements of the communication process.

Question 4

Research indicates that there are four different ways of communicating with people, and that we interact with one another in one or more of these four patterns. Students were asked to explain each of the communication styles, and comment on their personal communication style (specifically words, tone of voice and body language).

The four styles are openly aggressive behaviour, hostile submissive behaviour, warm submissive behaviour and assertive behaviour. Only a couple of candidates correctly identified and defined all four. The majority incorrectly labelled at least one of the styles and/or incorrectly defined the styles. The examiner got the distinct impression that students were basing their answers on guesswork rather than adequate exam preparation of material covered in Unit 4.

In relation to candidates’ personal styles, the majority identified themselves as ‘assertive’ but failed to provide adequate elaboration.

Question 5

Here, students were asked to explain five communication concepts. This question was well answered by most candidates.

1. **AIDA:** Many candidates correctly stated that AIDA is an acronym for attention, interest, desire and action. Those who scored higher marks also indicated that it describes a common list of events experienced when a person is selling a product or service.
2. **Consensus:** Several students correctly stated that consensus is a decision-making strategy that aims to include everyone in the process and resolve any objections. Individual objections or reservations are withdrawn after the competing views have been aired.
3. **“Moment of truth”:** Again, many students stated that the term is commonly used in marketing to describe customer encounters. Each moment of truth has the potential to be positive or negative and therefore very important
4. **Networking:** Students correctly identified networking as a common synonym for developing and maintaining contacts and personal connections with a variety of people who might be helpful to one’s career.
5. **Feedback:** Students correctly identified that feedback refers to messages or information that are sent back to the source from where the message came. For example, a public speaker adjusts his/her message by strengthening, de-emphasizing or changing the content or form of messages in order to optimize impact.