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Savvy Execs Can Speak Their Clients' Language

By Michael Chang

"The United States can be characterized as the home of the brave and the land of the monolingual." This scathing, but true, statement is from former Illinois Senator Paul Simon's 1980 book, "The Tongue-Tied American: Confronting the Foreign Language Crisis."

After more than 20 years of increased globalization, the opening of new markets and the shrinking of international boundaries, how much have things changed? You would hope that U.S. executives now realize the importance of dealing -- not to mention competing -- with foreign businesses in their local language and cultural contexts.

International executives long ago understood the importance of learning a second language. But what about the consequences of NOT learning a language or culture, particularly those of the country where they're scheduled to arrive and do business the next day?

The world, particularly Asia, has been eager to jump on the English bandwagon because it's the recognized *lingua franca* of business. Indeed, I'm often approached by Japanese *salarymen* (salaried office workers) who fork out tens of thousands of yen per month to attend "Eki-Mae" (In Front of the Train Station) English schools, hoping to transcend their fear of English.

One such businessman, Junichi Sato, is a salesperson for a Tokyo construction company, which doesn't expressly require employees to learn English for advancement or promotion. His comment is typical. "Michael, I envy you as a native speaker [of English] since English is the de facto language of international business," he says. But, he asks, "Why do you spend so many hours in the day learning to speak Japanese at all when you can hire the best bilingual support staff locally?"

Many executives question the need to learn another language when everyone else is learning English. However, speaking only English is a luxury that foreign businesspeople operating in Japan enjoy at their own peril, suggests Andrew Horvat in "Japanese Beyond Words: How to Walk and Talk Like a Native Speaker" (Stone Bridge Press, 2000).

"Executives seeking valuable business information should not relegate the decision of which stories are to be translated -- and when -- to total strangers," he writes.

Indeed, only a handful of news stories about major information-technology movers, such as Sony Corp., Matsushita Electric Industrial Co. Ltd. and Sharp Corp., that appear in the Nikkei daily economic newspaper are translated for mainstream foreign news publications. An executive who seeks an edge in, for example, low-cap Japanese investments for a multi-million dollar mutual fund requires instantaneous news about local companies and events, not simply those that make The Wall Street Journal.

International professionals who speak several languages seem to be privy to business areas and opportunities that wouldn't be offered to English-only speakers, says Nick Miller, a search-firm executive and an American who has spent more than four years living and working in Japan. "Limiting your world to one language and culture limits your possibilities and flexibility to adapt to an ever-changing market," says Mr. Miller, a recruiter with the insurance and commerce practice of Robert Walters Japan.

Language skills and cultural sensitivity are valuable at all levels of business. A meeting between American and Chinese executives I attended sheds light on the classic East/West divide. Both parties were cordial and polite during the small talk, but for the American side, the meeting soon turned into a question-and-answer session. As if attempting to display their superior knowledge of their own market as well as that of their soon-to-be Chinese partner, the executives put on a show of charm and wit.

To the Chinese, however, the mere fact that the Americans had been granted an audience showed that a level of trust had been established. The fact that one top American negotiator was fluent in Chinese and was able to see through the cordiality and appreciate the trust was invaluable to his employer. This small but highly significant touch also was enough to impress the Chinese and allow the parties to close the deal and break out the Lao-Jiu (Chinese liquor).

I have witnessed and heard countless war stories about the advantage Asian executives who speak impeccable English hold over monolingual executives during cross-cultural negotiations. I also recall times when Japanese team members with whom we were negotiating lapsed into Japanese among themselves, only to return to the table with a new consensus. This maneuver allows them to buy time to deliberate while keeping internal posturing from prying ears -- both excellent negotiation strategies. The interpreters understood the

mechanics of language and could relay details, such as price and market definition, but they lacked the sophistication to convey the intricate nuances of the underlying business, legal or cultural pressures each party was facing.

As an American lawyer working in the Asian telecommunications field, I've learned first-hand the importance of staying in touch with people I care about locally and around the globe. Picking up a new language and honing ones I already know allows me to remain in contact with relatives, colleagues, customers and vendors.

It also allows me to take responsibility for protecting my employer during a crisis. Just after Sept. 11, I was asked to review the liability insurance for each of our local operations to see how the company would be financially protected if faced with a major disaster. Each policy was about 30 pages long in its native language. The company would have suffered if it had to retain expensive and time-consuming translation services.

How should time-starved business executives learn a language? The established multinationals in Asia have in-house language training classes for local employees as well as for non-Japanese speaking foreigners. All expatriates aren't required to take language and culture education classes prior to overseas assignments, especially not those in medium-size to small companies. However, human-resource managers should see that this practice becomes universal.

This education should extend beyond the classroom experience. As in most large multinational companies, my firm has a diverse group of employees hailing from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Great Britain, Australia and the U.S. Many are fluent to some degree in a second or third language. This diversity distinguishes us from mono-cultural local companies. It allows us, literally, to speak the "customer's language."

I've learned to cope with a number of business environments, not just the legal environment of my training. Whether living in Tokyo or traveling around largely non-English speaking Asia, being able to speak the local language lets me respond to the local way of thinking, doing business, gathering information and, of course, communicating. As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe observed long ago, whoever isn't acquainted with foreign languages knows nothing of his own.