

TIPS TO COMMUNICATE WITH DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING INDIVIDUALS

As a hearing person, it may be difficult to imagine life without clear sound. In this day and age, it's hard enough to get any silence at all. If you're like most people, you may have found yourself tongue tied during an unexpected encounter with a Deaf or hard of hearing person. While it is not rocket science, interacting with a Deaf person is not something you're born with and certainly not something they taught you in school.

That's why we've compiled a tip sheet that doesn't require you to become a master of Sign Language. Whether you are a lawyer, restaurant manager, doctor, banker, or work in the hospitality industry, these are universal tips you can use in any scenario or profession. With good intentions and a little guidance, you can learn how to communicate with ease.

1. **Speak like an Italian: Use Body Language and Facial Expressions**

If you've traveled outside of America, you can identify with a Deaf person's two-fold challenge: a) Making yourself understood, and b) Understanding what the locals are saying. The natural solution: Use body language and facial expressions to ease your communication.

2. **Good Lighting Isn't Just for Photographers - It's For Deaf and Hard of Hearing People**

Because eyes are the primary compensation for their ears, Deaf and hard of hearing people intentionally congregate in well-lit venues. In fact, many will pick a business solely based on the rubric: "Is there good lighting?" You must avoid standing in front of a light source, such as a window or lamp. This creates a bright background and silhouette on your face, making it almost impossible for a Deaf person to speech read.

3. **Eye Contact Will Make or Break your Conversation**

Good lighting is one thing, but focused eye contact is another. Always look directly at the person you are speaking to. Even a slight turn of your head can obscure the Deaf or hard of hearing person's view causing them to miss out on important information.

4. **While You Watch Their Eyes, Remember They Are Watching Your Lips**

Speechreading is a skill not all Deaf persons have. Only about 30% of speech is visible on the lips, and even the best speechreaders cannot read every single word spoken. The other 70% relies on guesswork to fill in the gaps. To make it easier, speak slowly and clearly, but at a natural pace. It is tempting to exaggerate and overemphasize your words, but this actually distorts your lip movements. And, if you're having a hard time getting your message across, opt for rephrasing the sentence instead of repetition. Other distracting factors affecting communication include mustaches covering the lips and habits such as smoking, pencil chewing, and putting your hands in front of your face.

5. **Write It Down, Somewhere**

When someone tells you their phone number, you write it down. When you hear about an interesting book over cocktails, you jot it down on a napkin. Likewise, if you have to use a medium like pen and paper to facilitate communication with a Deaf or hard of hearing person, there is nothing to be embarrassed about. The most important thing is getting the point across.



6. Learn Basic Sign Language

While not all Deaf and hard of hearing people sign, learning a few basic signs and the American Sign Language (ASL) Manual Alphabet can set the stage for an inviting experience. ASL is not universal, nor is it “exotic”. It is still American, though its syntax may throw you off. If that’s the case, forget the syntax at the beginning and opt for building your basic vocabulary as well as A-B-Cs.

7. Get Their Attention, Politely

One of the common misconceptions that many people have about Deaf people is that they are aloof or worse, rude. This can often be attributed to the fact that most Deaf and hard of hearing people may not catch your initial greeting. While it may be tempting to stomp your foot to get one’s attention, this strategy can be considered rude as it causes unnecessary attention. Rather, consider giving Bob a soft tap on the shoulder, or a hand wave that is subtle. This is especially important in food service businesses, where it is obviously counterproductive to yell out a patron’s order number or name when their food is ready.

8. Know How to Properly Utilize a Sign Language Interpreter

Just as it can sometimes be frustrating to adjust to communicating with someone who speaks a different language than you, it can also seem like a godsend when a sign language interpreter is present. After all, this is the person who can speak with you in your language, and sign with the Deaf person just as fluently. But it is crucial that you learn the proper etiquette for communicating with interpreters, who are trained to assist the Deaf and hard of hearing. Here are important guidelines:

- Speak to the Deaf or hard of hearing client as you normally would a hearing client. That means refraining from language like “tell her/him that” or “can you ask him/her if...”
- Make eye contact with the Deaf person. This may sound counterintuitive, but Deaf people require eye contact at a greater level than hearing people. Since the interpreter can hear without visual cues, it isn’t necessary to look at them.
- Pace yourself. Now may be the time to slow down, and practice weeding out your “uums” and “aahs”. Interpreters don’t necessarily have kryptonite hearing, and are doing three things simultaneously: listening, processing, and interpreting into a different language.
- Keep the interaction professional. Interpreters are professional service providers and deserve to be treated like one.

9. Instead of Playing Phone Tag, Use E-mail, Text Message or the Relay

Often, telephone communication presents an understandable challenge to Deaf and hard of hearing people. If you find yourself not getting many, if any, of your well-intended voice mails back, it’s probably because it’s not the right medium. Relay services (text and video), text messaging and e-mail are fast becoming the Deaf community’s preferred communication choice of non-face-to-face communication. If you have the opportunity, always ask the Deaf or hard of hearing person, “What’s the best way for me to contact you?”

10. In Their Shoes, What Would YOU Want?

There are over 48 million Deaf and hard of hearing individuals living in the U.S., each with different needs and preferences. What works for some doesn’t always work for others and there is no cure-all for bridging the communication gap.

The best thing you can do to set the stage for a successful interaction? **ASK.**

