

Breaking down barriers

Most people would agree that communication should be simple and straightforward. Yet sometimes barriers can get in the way and complicate matters

Talking and communicating are two very different things. When you communicate, you are successful in getting your point across to the other person. However, sometimes barriers such as time constraints

or language difficulties can prevent this from happening. Some of these will be beyond your control, but it is important to know how to overcome them and to ensure that your advice and recommendations are

communicated clearly and effectively, or you could easily end up with a dissatisfied or confused customer on your hands! Let's take a look at some of the most common communication barriers:

01

Lack of time

Time is precious, and when you've got a never-ending list of tasks to complete and a queue of people to serve, it can be difficult to spend enough time with each customer. However, it is essential to be patient when communicating with someone who may be ill or who is anxious about their health or that of a relative. Don't rush or second-guess them – this will only lead to frustration on both sides. If possible, why not set up a system with the members of your team so that someone can continue serving other customers if a conversation takes longer than normal? Getting others to help out on the counter at busy times will ease the pressure too.

02

Language

Most customers will speak English – 92 per cent of people aged three and over report English (English or Welsh in Wales) to be their main language. However, that means almost one in 10 people speak a different first language, and a smaller percentage don't speak English at all. If you're in a situation where your customer doesn't speak English (or another language in common with you), you may need to ask a representative, such as a member of their family, to help. Also find out what languages are spoken among your team – you may be surprised at how many languages can be understood between you. Jargon can also be a language barrier. Avoid medical or technical terms and acronyms where possible – they just over complicate and confuse customers. For effective communication, keep it simple.

03

Physical disabilities

Disabilities such as poor hearing or eyesight can make communication difficult. If you are helping someone with poor hearing, take them to a quiet area of the pharmacy so you can speak more loudly without being overheard. Write down important information or use a patient information leaflet to emphasise key points. Patient information leaflets in large print can also be useful when talking to customers with poor eyesight. Ask your pharmacist for more suggestions and find out what information is available in other formats (e.g. Braille).

06

Misinterpretation

When talking to customers, it can be easy to jump to conclusions or misinterpret things. These misinterpretations then affect your own responses and beliefs. It is important to be sure that the meaning behind your communication is clear and accurate. When in doubt, ask the customer for clarification.

05

Noise

Internal noise is the 'self-talking' that we all do, such as thinking about things that need to be done, wondering what the other person is thinking about, or contemplating what we'll do when we go home for the evening. All of which prevent us from being entirely focused on the conversations we're involved in with customers. Blocking out these thoughts can be difficult, but it is essential to do so in order to focus on the customer. We can also be distracted by external noise, such as other conversations, traffic noise, or a crying baby. Again, moving to a quiet area of the pharmacy can help to eliminate these distractions.

04

Emotions

There are often times when a customer is too upset or embarrassed to ask for your advice. Showing empathy and understanding and moving to a quiet area of the pharmacy will help the customer to open up.

