
The Complexity of Language at Publix Supermarket Store #0258

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I remember my first day as a Publix bagger two years ago. I went in thinking, "Shoot, any moron could put groceries in a bag." On my first day I was paired with Dennis, a sixty-five-year-old bagger who'd been working for Publix for eight years. He didn't say much, but he told me to watch him and, when I felt I was ready, to go ahead and take over for him. I then observed what to put with what, what to keep by itself, and what to double-bag. It was a little more complicated than I had thought and I was impressed by their means of communicating these rules to me.

Publix is a discourse community. John Swales states that a discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common goals, has mechanisms of intercommunication of its members, uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback, utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims, has acquired some specific lexis, and has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursal expertise (Swales 288-91). After reading Swales and his criteria, I realized that discourse communities are everywhere and I had never realized it. Even Publix, where I've worked as a bagger for two years, is a discourse community according to Swales' criteria. There is a great deal of communication amongst us associates. We have adopted our own lexis which will be talked about later. We also communicate through bulletin boards, newsletters, paycheck attachments, and Post-it notes as well. Publix also has intercommunication as a chain. A latent side effect of working at Publix is learning how to communicate with other people. I plan to examine Publix as a discourse community and expose the complexity of language within the community.

Expertise

The complexity of language at Publix is evident in the hierarchy of Publix associates. There are associates that are new and taking their first job, but also seventy-five-year-old store managers who have been through all the different departments and work to occupy their time during the day. In an interview with the Assistant Customer Service Manager, Julia Pierce, I was informed that she and many of the other managers have been working for Publix since they were teenagers. As opposed to some jobs where a new employee might be handed a pamphlet and told to memorize it, Publix is a little more complicated. The more experienced associates lead by example to teach the new employees.

Publix associates are expected to meet or exceed the expectations of the customers, whatever their needs may be. This is accomplished through the use of language amongst the different departments. For instance, if a customer has a general question, such as where to find

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something, an associate of the customer service department would help them. But say that customer wants to know the difference between different cuts of meat; then, the customer would be referred to the meat department. The customer service associate would then call the meat department, give them a heads-up that a customer is coming back and what the inquiry was. This exchange of information is complex and necessary for smoother functioning of the store. The customer would never know it was going on.

Genres

The complexity of language at Publix goes deeper than just verbal communication. Important information is posted in many places around Publix. The most notable area is probably the bulletin board next to the time clock. The placement of the board ensures the information it holds reaches all Publix associates because it's in a place that, no matter where they work, they'd have to see it. We also receive information attached to our paychecks, so, unless associates are not picking up their paychecks, they are informed. Lori also made note in her interview that the majority of her communication is through the schedule, telling everyone when to come to work and how long to work for.

Each department has a set of complex guidelines they follow, or genres. Swales' fourth criterion of a discourse community is "a discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims" (Swales 290). The Deli has a set of

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guidelines that dictate temperatures for their food, how much meat to put on a sandwich, and what to charge for everything. The grocery department has a diagram of the store that shows where to put everything. Bakery has a set of guidelines for how to make their baked goods. The customer service department has guidelines for how to take care of the customers, how to make the schedule, and how to keep count of the revenue. The produce

department has a set of guidelines to determine shelf life of the produce, what needs to be refrigerated, and where to display it, etc. These genres all support the argument that language, even in a grocery store, is very complex.

Lexis

Communication amongst Publix associates is unique in that it utilizes words or phrases that may be confusing to the everyday person but make complete sense to us. Associates adopt a certain lexis which they use to save time and seem more professional. For instance, instead of getting on the intercom and saying, "Stephanie, come to your register because you have a customer waiting in your line," the manager would simply say, "Stephanie, check please."

In addition to saving time and sounding more professional, we use some words to describe certain situations. For me, being a larger male associate who was always at the front of the store, I was the go-to guy for a suspected shoplifter. The managers devised a code word—"peek-a-boo"—to allude to shoplifters. The front-end coordinator would then, for instance, say, "Tyler, peek-a-boo on aisle four." Anyone else would be confused by this short statement, but I knew to go for a walk down aisle four and make sure all the customers knew I was there and that I was watching them. Although this may seem invasive, it's a necessary operation to ensure protection of store merchandise. The customers had no idea that they were being watched so closely.

Intercommunication

The average person never thinks about how much communication goes on within a grocery store, or a grocery store chain for that matter. In an interview with the Assistant Customer Service

Manager Lori Robinson, I learned that Publix Super Markets in our vicinity communicate via email. Through emails we receive alerts such as BOLOs (“Be on the Lookout”) to notify us when shoplifters or people with fake checks are systematically working through the stores in the area, or to spread the word that there’s a misprint in the weekly advertisements.

Verbal communication also plays an important role in working at Publix. Assistant Customer Service Manager Julia Pierce made note that the majority of her communication is done face to face. She is responsible for making sure that customers are taken care of and that the cashiers and baggers are doing their jobs correctly.

While in the process of writing this paper, I learned even more about the use of language at Publix, more than I would have liked. Communication and the use of language are crucial at Publix, so crucial that a single miscommunication can result in unemployment. Unfortunately, I experienced this first hand. When I left Melbourne for the University of Central Florida, I attempted to transfer to a Publix in Orlando. Many students who work at Publix transfer to stores near their school without a problem due to the superior communication of store and district managers. I must have been one of thousands of students trying to transfer to stores near UCF because I couldn’t find any store that wasn’t already fully staffed. My backup plan was to continue to work at Publix in Melbourne to keep my employed status. I figured that I would go back and work all of winter break and then have a better chance to transfer during the spring semester. After discussing this idea with my managers, I was informed that I would need to work once every thirty days to keep my employment. I did this for my first three months at school without a problem. Then, toward the end of November, I asked to be put on the schedule for the following week. My main manager told me I’d be working Sunday. I called over there the day before I was supposed to work to see what time she ended up scheduling me. The main manager who was supposed to put me on the schedule wasn’t there and the manager who was there said I wasn’t on the schedule. Apparently, he checked the hard copy of the schedule instead of the master one in the computer. Long story short, I didn’t work Sunday and therefore violated the thirty day rule which resulted in my termination.

As you can see, the means of communication and use of language at Publix are anything but simple. There’s a lot of complexity buried behind the scenes of that welcoming neighborhood grocery store. Next time you go to a Publix, I encourage you to just listen to different things you hear from the people that work there. You might hear words that you’ve never heard before, or even witness the intercommunication between associates to assess a problem or better serve a customer.

Work Cited

Swales, John. “The Concept of Discourse Community.” *I Am a Writer in the World: Researching Personal and Academic Literacies*. Ed. Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs. Acton: Copley Custom Textbooks, 2009. 285-296. Print.