

# The Language Barrier

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## Introduction

The customer quickly ran off with her package in hand as Heather watched her go. “Did that customer really just say that to me? I can’t believe she would say such thing!” Stinging from the insult hurled at her, Heather McCook, a Service Experience Specialist at Trillium Department Store, walked through the back employee room and wondered if she could handle the Customer Service job after all. She had been working for this retail store for almost a year and customers had always treated her exceptionally. But what happened this time? Why was this customer so rude towards her? Heather helped customers with their returns, questions regarding their retail card, directions around the store, and answering phone calls. Before this position, she was a sales person that assisted customers with their purchases. However, never had she experienced something so challenging in her workplace. She had been in the Service Experience position for three months when the challenge came along.

The new position as a Service Experience Specialist was very different compared to being a salesperson and other part-time jobs she had in the past as a student. The level of responsibility proved higher and customer interactions were more challenging. One of the goals of a Service Experience Specialist was to make the customer’s shopping experience easy by quickly answering their questions and resolving their issues.

## Background

Trillium Department Store was a retail store that emphasized customer service and was known for always providing the best high-end service. It was people-oriented as it helped employees grow and they promoted from within. Customers chose Trillium Department Store because they were always the priority. Customers trusted the expertise and knowledge of the employees. Aside from that, customers received the best service because employees went above and beyond to assist them. Additionally, Trillium Department Store carried famous brands that were well-known for their quality.

As a Service Experience Specialist, Heather was responsible for assisting with issues at the customer level throughout the whole store. This meant that when she received calls about customer issues from various departments that she walked over to each department as issues arose to help the sales person assist the customer. Also, in her position she answered phone calls from customers who were not physically in the store. Their questions were mostly about their online orders and when they should expect them to arrive, as well as questions about their retail card regarding their current balance, minimum payment, and so forth. Heather was proud of her ability to do a great job.

The environment in Trillium Department Store was very pleasant. Customers were happy because they were having an enjoyable shopping experience and employees were happy with their job and duties. Employees were required to have high interpersonal communication skills and were able to use their own judgment in complicated situations. The employees were empowered to drive their own business and success; thus, they went above and beyond for their customers.

Heather was very pleased to be moved to the position of Service Experience Specialist, because she would be able to assist employees throughout the store and solve complicated problems in the customer level. She would be one of the respected “go to” people in the team that employees would approach for help in regards to solving customer issues and providing the right tools to develop themselves as salespeople.

### **The Incident**

At the end of Thursday night, during Heather’s second month in this new position, as she stood behind the customer service counter, a woman approached her. She greeted the customer politely and the customer continued by saying “I am here for my order that I ordered from the catalog.” Heather went ahead and asked the customer if that meant that she had an online order to pick up here at the store. The customer angrily replied, “I just told you that I ordered it from the catalog.” At that time Heather felt very confused because she thought that she had the right idea about what the customer needed but she was not sure. Heather was frustrated that the customer would not clarify what she meant. Heather responded, “I’m sorry ma’am but English is not my primary language and I do not understand what ordering from the catalog means. I want to make sure I get your request right so I can further assist you.” The customer replied, “Then Trillium Department Store should not hire employees whose primary language is not English. Now I have an order to pick up so will you go get it?” Heather found the customer’s order, and sent the harried woman on her way.

### **The Challenge**

But, Heather continued to dwell on how she was treated by the customer. She was shocked that a customer would ever harass her because English was not her primary language. Heather felt discriminated against and that she should have stood up for herself and respond to that comment. But what could she have said? Should she have put her personal feelings aside and continue on with the customer’s request or should she have made a comment about how she did not appreciate

the way the customer was talking to her? Would her job be in stake if she decided to protect herself and ignore the customer's request?

Heather knew that she had to make sure that her relationship with the customers, and especially with the company, was not affected. Her future in this company was important to her and her decisions had to be directed towards that goal. Heather did not want to trouble her supervisor with this issue but was still confused and unsure as to how she should have responded. Heather wondered how she could handle the stress of dealing with rude customers in the future.

