




Finding & Taking

*Advantage*  
*of the* **Opportunity**



**Editor's Note:** As TIME magazine outlined in its recent special report, "The United States of America," the United States is undergoing some major transitions in its demographic character. As the feature articles in this issue of *Modern Homes* points out, women are playing a greater role in America's economy (including home buying) and the aging America is forcing new ways of thinking about housing. At the same time, the U.S. population is still growing, due primarily to the influence of immigration and the high birth rate among the Hispanic population. Instead of seeing these changing demographics as challenges to the manufactured and modular housing industries, there are tremendous marketing opportunities inherent in these demographic shifts.

## *Handling the Foreign Accent*

As Nancy Friedman, president of the Telephone Doctor, points out in her new customer service training course, it's more and more common to talk with people whose native language isn't our own. These accents can be both international and domestic.

How many times have you talked with someone just from a different region of the USA and not understood him or her? Miscommunication is easy with anyone who's not talking as we're used to hearing. Today, with more and more business going global, it's key to be ready to know how to deal with a foreign accent. Don't forget, sometimes it's us that has the foreign accent to others. To those from another country—we are the ones that have the foreign accent. So these tips will go both ways, and they're effective both on the phone and in person.

Taken from the popular video of the same name, *How to Handle the Foreign Accent*, here are the five key points to know to help you at your job (and in your personal life too) when working with someone who is difficult to understand—accent or not. ■ ■ ■ ■

### **1. Don't Pretend to Understand**

It's OK to gently explain you're having a little difficulty understanding them. Let's face it, if you have an accent—you know it. So it's not a surprise. One of the least effective things one could do when not understanding someone is to PRETEND they do. Some folks nod or say, "OK" just to move the conversation along. That's not doing anyone any good. It's perfectly OK to simply and

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gently say, “I apologize. I am having a little difficulty understanding you. If you could slow down; just a little bit; I’ll be able to get it all correct for you.” That’s the most important thing to the person with the accent; knowing you WANT to help and get it right. They’re aware you might be having difficulty. And if you nod yes or pretend you understand, it won’t help the situation at all. Your tone of voice is international; universal. So keep it at a light, slower pace—and yes, smiling is also universal. They’ll hear your smile in any language.

The phrase mentioned above is most effective—and a key phrase to learn. I know for a fact it is accepted very warmly. I’ve had many a person from another country come up and thank me for sharing that technique with the audience. It apologizes, acknowledges, empathizes and creates credibility. It shows you want to help.

## 2. Don’t RUSH

Rushing threatens callers. Often there’s a tendency to want to really rush someone who speaks with an accent. Not a good idea at all. Rushing threatens the best of us, let alone someone who is not able to express themselves in our own style. Slow down. Not to excess of course, but if you find yourself constantly saying “uh huh,” over and over in rapid succession, you’re probably rushing the customer.

## 3. Don’t Shout

They are NOT hard of hearing. We usually get a little laugh on this one. Many a time we subconsciously speak louder—or repeat the same word over and over, thinking that will help. It doesn’t. People with accents normally hear very well. It’s insulting to shout at them. Keep that smile on your face, it’ll show that you have the patience to help and keep trying to let them know “you are there to help.” It might take time, but it will help.

## 4. Don’t Be Rude

No one really thinks they’re rude. But if you’ve ever said: “Hey, I can’t understand you” or even a short, terse, “HUH?”—you’re considered rude. Again, go back to #1 and explain you’re having a little difficulty understanding them. They’ll often repeat it for you. If the situation is hopeless and you simply aren’t getting anywhere, don’t be embarrassed or afraid to call for help. Perhaps another person can better understand what the customer is saying. But remember, being shuffled from one person to another is frustrating to anyone—accent or not.

## 5. Do Keep a JOB Aid Available

Most often, we hear that 80 percent of the calls are from a certain area with the same accent. Be it all Hispanic, or all Asian, or all European. If your job has you working with a large percentage of one accent, keep a few simple phrases in that lan-

guage near you. Short phrases that would let the customer know you’re trying. If you’re in an Hispanic environment, phrases like, “Un momento por favor” (One moment please.) will help. Even if we mispronounce it, they’ll understand. Hopefully, there is someone in your area that is either fluent or well spoken in one particular language who can help you formulate and effective work aid.

And remember what we said earlier—your smile is universal. Use it early and often, no matter who you’re talking to! ■

*Nancy Friedman is President of Telephone Doctor, a customer service training company in St. Louis, Mo. She is a featured speaker at association, chamber and corporate meetings. To receive her free monthly email on customer service and a free subscription to the Telephone Doctor Newsletter, “The Friendly Voice”, go to [www.telephonedoctor.com](http://www.telephonedoctor.com) or call 314-291-1012.*

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