



EXAMINER'S REPORT

AUGUST 2009

COMMUNICATION SKILLS Certificate in Marketing Skills

General Comments

The *Communication Skills* module seeks to provide students with the requisite skills to become effective communicators. Effective communications is a key factor in successful organizations as it occupies a significant amount of managers' time - communicating with superiors, colleagues and staff. The purpose of the August 2009 paper was to examine students' understanding of the importance of communications and information flows within organizations, and about the characteristics of effective communications.

The level, style and format of the exam questions in the August exam were consistent with previous papers. There was greater evidence of exam preparation, candidates seemed to understand that more time and effort should be spent on questions that were worth more marks. Students applied the concepts, using examples and/or incorporating their work and own experience to reinforce their argument rather than relying on opinion alone.

Candidates who did not do well on this exam tended to answer questions too briefly and/or incompletely, and use a bullet-style rather than a full sentence structure. As stated in previous Examiners Reports, at this level of qualification, students need to employ a well-structured format with sub-headings and supporting examples.

Question 1: Case Study – Maura's Promotion

This mini-case study, carrying 50% of the marks, focuses on a very practical aspect of communication skills – handling customer service, particularly complaints. Maura has just been promoted to the position of Customer Service Manager; however, she has inherited a department that provides very poor customer service, especially when it comes to difficult customers.

The first section asked students to identify the seven essential steps for dealing with customer complaints, retaining good customers and ensuring problems don't arise again. Candidates who did well on this questions correctly identified the steps as: 1) Say "Thank You" and explain why you appreciate the complaint; 2) Apologise for the mistake; 3) Promise to deal with it immediately; 4) Ask only for essential information; 5) Correct the mistake; 6) Check customer satisfaction; and 7) Correct the procedures which led to the mistake.

The second section asked candidates to discuss whether customer complaints are actually beneficial to the company. Candidates who did well on this question argued that complaints should be valued, even regarded as a 'gift' by an organization. Stronger students also indicated that, if handled correctly, disgruntled customers could be turned into committed and loyal patrons.

The third section focused on dealing with difficult customers. The course notes provide a step-by-step framework for dealing with this issue (Unit 6 – Dealing with Customer Complaints). Stronger students alluded to the fact that difficult customers should be treated with empathy, and how the complaint can actually become a ‘moment of truth’ opportunity for the organization.

Question 2

This question focused on the extent to which teamwork improves performance. Candidates were asked to (i) describe the characteristics of an effective team and (ii) identify the key sources of conflict in teams. Again, the course notes provide students with an extensive step-by-step framework (Unit 7 – Teambuilding Skills) for dealing with both of these issues. Students who scored higher marks on this question used examples to explore the importance of teams in modern organizations, and the difference between teams and groups. In addition, they commented on how conflict in a team can evolve and how to resolve destructive conflict.

Question 3

Here, students were asked to explore the importance of internal communication, and what happens when organisations fail to communicate effectively with this audience. The premise of the question is that a ‘listening’ organisation is a ‘learning’ organization. Stronger answers commented on the fact that if an organization doesn’t listen to its staff, it cannot be responsive to changing needs. Feedback from both outside and inside the organisation can essentially help it improve its processes and products.

Question 4

Students were asked to describe the five criteria that customers use to evaluate service. They include, (i) Tangibility, (ii) Reliability; (iii) Responsiveness; (iv) Assurance, and (v) Communication. Students who did well in this question provided examples to illustrate their point. For example, when describing tangibility, one student indicated that the physical environment of a store is an important and visible part of the service, and therefore a good example of tangibility. He/she commented that while the physical environment of Lidl and Aldi is functional compared with Tesco or Superquinn, it fits in with customers’ expectations of the cheaper image of the German discount stores.

Question 5

Students were required to write a letter of apology to a client. As per the course notes (and Question 2) there are seven essential steps to dealing with customer complaints, retain a good customer and ensure the problem does not arise again. Students who did well in this question incorporated some/all of these steps into their letter. Course notes (Unit 9 – Better Business Writing) also provide students with valuable tips. Candidates who did well on this question incorporated the basic rules of good writing: short sentences, short paragraphs, simple, clear language, and good grammar. They also acknowledged the six crucial questions that underpin all communications: the 5 Ws and H.