

British companies still not getting the language message

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While almost all French and German companies are able to deal with enquiries from abroad, their British counterparts just aren't getting the message, according to a new survey.

The survey shows that even a basic request in French or German will stump most UK businesses. UK staff who deal with frontline enquiries are falling spectacularly behind their European competition and very few have the training and support to respond in languages other than English. However, in mainland Europe things are very different, with the vast majority of French and German receptionists able to communicate fluently and clearly in a different language.

Commissioned by specialist language recruiter, Euro London Appointments, the survey involved calling the British offices of 116 FTSE 250 companies and asking for their postal address in either German or French. Only four companies were able to answer right away in the caller's language. A further 12 asked the caller to hold and found someone who could speak the correct language. However, 17 companies simply hung up.

Comments from UK receptionists included "Sorry, I'm not with you, can you speak English?" and "We only speak English here!" shouted loudly down the phone. Others resorted to "If you can't speak English I just can't help you, I thought you all learned English!" and "Oh, for God's sake!" before the phone was slammed down.

In comparison, when 116 similar companies in Germany were called, 114 were able to answer in perfect English; 85 were able to answer in French, and a large number could also speak Spanish too.

Responses from French companies also put the UK to shame with 112 immediately switching to English and 68 able to answer in German. Of the non-German speakers, a large number were able to switch to Spanish when that was offered as an alternative.

Steve Shacklock, Director of Euro London Appointments, which recruits multilingual staff across a range of industry sectors in the UK and continental Europe commented: "The comments from the English receptionists might seem funny, but it's a disgraceful situation really. As business is now done on a global basis, investing in language skills, whether by hiring multilingual staff or installing training initiatives, is not only a way to protect your reputation, it's an effective way to ensure your company's growth in world markets. With the Olympics coming here in 2012, we're going to see visitors from all around the world, with money to spend. The good news is that this still leaves plenty of time to invest in languages and companies that do so will certainly reap the benefits."

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