Off mic with Phil Smith: On message – communication breakdown

I like email. Not only is it quick and neat, but it also gives you a written record of what’s been said. And, you don’t need to find a pen to use it.

Philip H. D. SMITH.
Published: November 16, 2005 Last updated: December 28, 2015

One of the perks of our job is that people keep thrusting stationery upon us. Any interpreter’s home has jotters from obscure manufacturers of extruded goods, pads from hotels in distant and moist countries, and A4 blocs from intergovernmental agencies dedicated to improving the human condition. We are also given pens by associations, groups, professional bodies, governments and the better organised AIIC regions. So in theory we’re geared up for effective communication.

The well-organised Smiths have got a small tub near the phone that contains pens and pencils. There is a jotter neatly waiting next to the phone. In theory, we’re ready for anything. In practice, well read on…

The phone rings and the caller is offering work in a sexy venue with nice colleagues and languages I more or less understand. “Hold on, I’ll jot down the details”, I say. We call this pride before a fall. Someone has taken the jotter that’s been sitting by the phone, sheets as white as the tundra, waiting for this very call. “Anyone seen the jotter?”, I ask. Looks of affronted innocence are all I get. I look for a scrap of paper. In our kitchen we have newspapers, magazines, bank statements, school reports, the Treaty of Rome, sewing patterns, recipes, junk mail, shopping catalogues, and instruction manuals. There’s probably a managed forest somewhere in Finland keeping us supplied. But no jotter. I manage to get an envelope so I can write down this frightfully important message on the back of it.

Then I start hunting for a pen.

The tub next to the phone is full of pens and pencils, but I can’t find one pen that writes. Somebody in the house puts the pens that don’t work back into the tub instead of throwing them away – I suspect the same criminal gang that’s behind the loss of jotters. Exhaustive investigations, involving my moving between several rooms of the house, have led to me believe that the culprits are my own flesh and blood. I have mentioned this heinous act to the children more than once, but they simply give me a withering “get-a-grip” look. Will I find salvation in a pencil? You know the answer already. Every pencil has a broken lead, or it’s a kind of pastel pink that is invisible to the naked eye except on magenta sugar paper.

Whilst I’m on the subject, why are the children unmoved by my plight, which would become their plight if I, the supplier of hamburgers and lifts stop getting these gigs? Isn’t there some expression that goes “for the want of a nail the battle was lost”? I’m sure you know what I mean, but none of
this cuts any ice with the chromosomes.

I am digressing so let’s return to the scene chez Smith. Very Important Consultant Interpreter is waiting patiently for me to write down the details about this mega-meeting in a tropical country during the European winter (we all hate these assignments because of the wrench of leaving our families freezing at home). I’ve just about managed to find an envelope to commit the details to paper, and the only thing I can write with is a laundry marker that calls for bold strokes and big writing. Let’s hope VICI keeps it short.

Well I finally get the message onto paper. The dates, the languages and the venue. But VICI must be wondering what sort of dipstick he’s employing if taking a simple message becomes such a mission.

To reduce stress and enhance my image with all my important callers – those who aren’t trying to sell me a timeshare in Spain or fax paper – I’ve started weeding out all the pens that don’t work. I occasionally go on these rampages and in the past I’ve got rid of newspapers, tidied my study, finally sorted out my vocabulary lists, arranged the books by language and the children in alphabetical order.

So there you have it. I’ve now culled the pen population, lined up all the spare jotters and I await your call. But if you don’t want to hear a grown interpreter have a brief but intense hissy fit, please use email.

"Phil Smith is a UK-based freelance interpreter."

Recommended citation format: