

Is use of 'Pittsburghese' cutting into your bottom line?

Pittsburgh Business Times - by Christopher Davis

Date: Monday, April 5, 2004, 12:00am EDT - Last Modified: Thursday, April 1, 2004, 12:23pm EST

When it comes to recruiting new businesses and promoting the region, Pittsburgh could have more stacked against it than just the city's budget crisis or the wet weather.

Native Pittsburghers' unique vocabulary and speech patterns can sometimes leave the wrong impression with prospective business clients in other parts of the country, said Lynda Waltner Stucky, a speech pathologist, voice coach and owner of ClearlySpeaking -- a Moon Township-based consulting firm.

Ms. Stucky said she has received calls from local executives and companies concerned about how the local dialect might be interpreted by those from outside the region.

"They're trying to increase their corporate image and the Pittsburghese gets in the way," she said. "Words like 'nebbly' or 'yins,' some of those words that nobody else knows."

And Ms. Stucky's clients are not alone in their communication concerns.

The Pittsburgh chapter of the Business Marketing Association is sponsoring a four-week educational series, called "Take a Look in the Mirror: 4 Hours ... 4 Experts." The series is aimed at not only helping local businesspeople improve their verbal communication skills, but also their leadership, creative and presentation skills.

While local dialects bring areas such as Western Pennsylvania "a lot of color and flavor," Ms. Stucky said colloquialisms can be detrimental. "In a way, it's a good thing. It does bring a uniqueness to our area," Ms. Stucky said. "In certain settings, it's not really appropriate.

"In a boardroom if you use words like 'nebbly' or 'yins,' I think you are looked at rather strangely, and it comes across as if you're somebody who is uneducated," she continued. "If we're trying to attract businesses to our region, I think it's important to communicate well."

BMA-Pittsburgh president Michelle Merlo, an account supervisor with the Downtown public relations firm Skutski & Oltmanns Inc., said the marketing association geared its series toward helping Pittsburgh businesspeople with all aspects of their interaction with other businesspeople.

Essentially, local businesspeople are ambassadors for the region every time they travel, so they need to be at their best, Ms. Merlo said. Pittsburghers have a distinctive accent, as do residents of

Boston or New York, so Ms. Merlo, who often travels to Las Vegas and the West Coast, said she makes an effort to "make sure I don't drop my g's and I don't say f-l-a-h-r for f-l-o-w-e-r."

"(People) will recognize you as being from Pittsburgh," Ms. Merlo said. "Therefore, you're representing Pittsburgh in everything you do. If people brush up on all of (their speaking and other communication skills), we're pretty sure they can represent Pittsburgh in a positive way."

The BMA-Pittsburgh Education Series -- its 13th annual event focusing on business marketing topics -- will feature four 90-minute classes on four Thursday nights in April, beginning on April 8 with a session titled "Developing the Leader Within." The first session will profile each participant's leadership style and help them understand how to maximize their leadership strengths and motivate others. The April 15 class will focus on "leading a killer brainstorming session," while the April 29 session will provide "the skills to deliver a message with confidence," according to the BMA's promotional materials.

Ms. Stucky will also lead a session on April 22, titled "Harnessing the Voice of a Pro." In addition to a segment on Pittsburghese, the session will help attendees recognize what kind of "voiceprint" they leave when they speak with other people.

"There are stereotypes associated with our voices," Ms. Stucky said. "You just sum up people based on the way they talk."

Mark Sweeney, a senior principal with McCallum Sweeney Consulting Inc. -- a Greenville, S.C.-based site selection firm that has worked with Pittsburgh economic development and government officials -- said he likes the idea of a program that sensitizes businesspeople and others to the fact that they are "a de facto ambassador for the community" every time they travel.

Mr. Sweeney said the use of slang or a unique accent would not cause his firm to rule out a potential location or representative of a region trying to lure one of his clients. However, he said when it comes to locations for customer service or call center operations "some companies do look for (locations with) as neutral an accent as possible."

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