

Survival by the senses

When you're living in a country where you don't yet speak the language or know how things run, there are certain survival strategies you can use. One of the most important, especially during new transactions, is observation.

By Chantal Panozzo | For example, upon moving to Switzerland, you may want to get a cell phone. (Or 'handy' as the Swiss call them.) But unlike in your native country, buying one may not be so easy. For an expat, getting a cell phone can feel as complicated as buying a house.

Being phone-less for weeks on end would have been bad enough back home. Upon arrival in Switzerland, not only was I cut off from friends and family who were 5,000 miles away, but because of language barriers, I couldn't even communicate with those standing right next to me.

On hold

So, determined to get a phone before more than a month passed, I decided to observe.

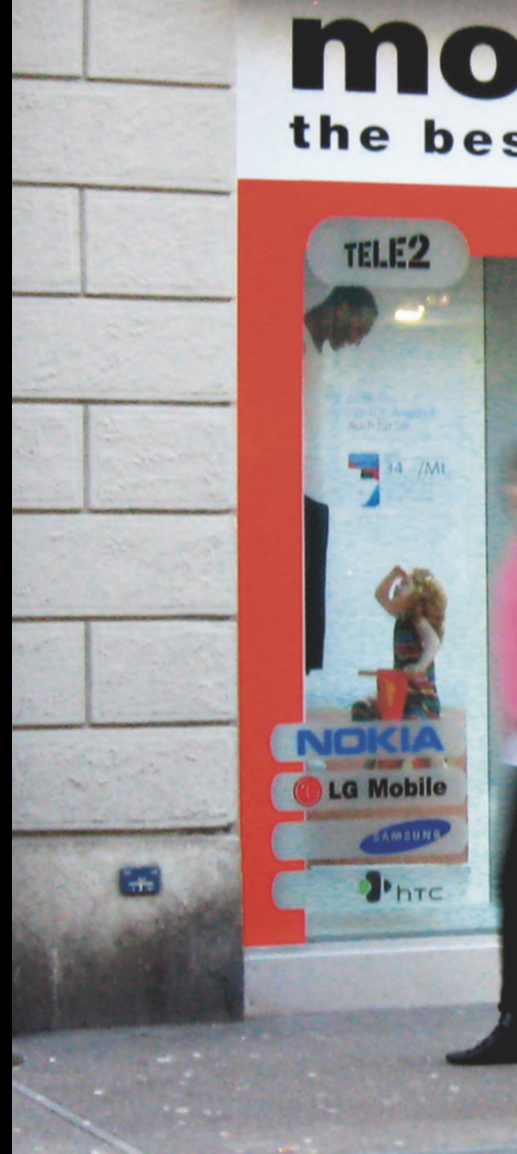
First, I found the Swisscom store. Then I stared in the window, trying to determine my best approach into the world of foreign phones.

I walked through the door. I looked around. I stood by the phones and tried

to look like I needed help. I picked up different accessories. I smudged sparkling-clean display cases. I paced from one side of the store to the other. After 15 minutes of such fruitless tactics, I folded my arms in front of me and wondered where the heck the customer service was. I didn't yet know that Switzerland doesn't believe in the concept.

I took a brochure. All I could gather from the German was that plans here are just as complicated and overpriced as they are in the United States. I couldn't read the details, but that didn't really bother me. At home I didn't understand the cell phone brochures either, and they were in English. Cell phone calling plans are clearly written to confuse the world on purpose – so I didn't feel like a total failure. Yet.

The problem thus far, I realised, was that I had only been relying on my sense of sight. And in the case of any new transaction, using just one of the five senses is simply not enough.



No zoning zones

It's amazing how many senses an expat must use compared to a native. Every day is exhausting because everything takes so much more effort when you're on your own in an entirely new culture.

In the States, I never thought about much while waiting in lines. But can expats afford to zone out while waiting in line, for example, at the post office?

Of course not, they're too busy trying to remember how to say, "two stamps please". Over and over, they say it in their heads, since the alternative is to fail at something as simple as mailing a letter.

Even at the post office counter, the expat still can't relax because inevitably, the clerk will say something they don't understand. In a panic, the expat will remember to say *Wie bitte*, which means "repeat please". Except, since the expat didn't practice muttering it for 10 minutes before the transaction, it will come out "wee bitter" instead of "vee bittah".



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While the expat blushes, the clerk will sigh and switch to English ... maybe.

Plan B

English will not always be the lucky outcome. Back at the cell phone store, since my sense of sight wasn't accomplishing much, my sense of hearing took over. Every few minutes, I heard the cell phone clerks speaking into microphones.

Ahh! I realised they must be calling out numbers. I switched back to my sense of sight and looked to see where I could get a number. I spotted a dispenser near the entrance. Victory was imminent.

I stared at the number and said it to myself in German so I'd understand when it was called. People came and went and I stood there, waiting, muttering. Sixty-five. *Fünfundsechzig. Fünfundsechzig. Fünfundsechzig.* What's so hard about that?

After 15 minutes passed, I realised the clerks, speaking in their various Swiss-German dialects, must have called my number without me understanding it.

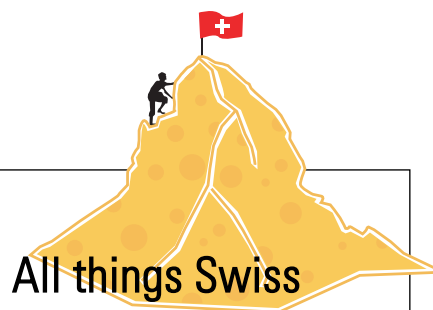
And back to Plan A

Since my sense of hearing obviously didn't help matters, I let my sense of sight take over again. This time, determined not to be passed by, I waited by the number dispenser until a young woman entered the store and took one. Then I took the next one.

Now I wouldn't have to listen for numbers. I could just play 'follow the leader'. After this woman went up, I would be next. I relaxed – slightly – satisfied that 45 minutes after entering the tiny Swisscom store, I might actually get waited on.

After the next few numbers were called, the young woman with the number right before mine, on whom I'd been depending for all future communication, turned to me and said, "Do you speak English? Because I can't understand a word they're saying."

My last hope lost, I sighed, crumpled up my number and told myself I'd try again tomorrow.



All things Swiss

Switzerland through the ages

1893: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle releases *The Adventure of the Final Problem*, in which he kills off world-famous detective Sherlock Holmes at the Reichenbach Falls. However, though the detective and his nemesis tumbled into the abyss, stubborn fans hounded the author until he finally resurrected the wily Holmes in 1903 to sleuth again. (Read more about Sherlock in Switzerland on page 52.)



Expat encyclopaedia

Customer service: Something that is nonexistent, or that you need to pay at least SFr 1.10 a minute for via phone. I call this the '1 800 PAY ME MORE' concept. After all, nothing is free in Switzerland. Not even customer service.

Feeling stupid: As an expat, feeling stupid is just something you learn to live with. It happens every day to some extent. Here are some of the ways I've felt stupid since becoming an expat:

– I've said *Grüezi* to the grocery store clerk as I'm about to leave, when what I meant to say was, *Danke ...* I mean, *Merci*.

– I pondered what the 'E' button in the elevator meant ... for weeks.

– I've spent an inordinate amount of time staring at ticket machines at tram stops in Zurich, wondering why the stop I need to get to isn't printed on it while others are.

Internet addiction: I have an impatient anticipation for about 15:00, because then it's morning in the U.S. and I might get an email from a friend or family member – the next best thing after a phone call.

Pre-pay cell phone: In Switzerland, you cannot just get a cell phone because you've got the money to pay for it. And if you're feeling out of sorts because you can't communicate with the outside world, let alone the Swiss population, Swiss bureaucracy doesn't make things any easier.

Without a residency permit, you cannot get a regular monthly cell phone plan. But you won't get a permit for six to eight weeks after arrival. So what's an expat to do? Get a pre-pay cell phone. Big players include Orange and Sunrise. When looking back, many expats find the pre-pay phones cost less money in the long run anyway. So consider it a blessing in disguise. I do.

Skype: An Internet phone service, Skype is likely the cheapest way to call home. And by purchasing a regular Skype phone, there's no need to sit at your computer to chat.