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RBC talks the talk

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"One number, 150 languages," screams a huge RBC billboard at Toronto's Harbourfront announcing the bank's new live translation service. The hoarding, geared toward the lucrative newcomers' segment in Canada, asks consumers to speak in their own language when calling 1-800-ROYAL 1-1. "That's because over 42% of new immigrants don't possess English or French as their mother tongue," says Mark Whitmell, director, cultural markets at RBC in Toronto. "Often, newcomers ask their children or relatives to translate their needs to call centre employees."

The solution is live translators - RBC has 2,600 at any given time (via a contract with U.S.-based Line Language Services) - who have a three-way conversation with the customer and the agent, providing real-time translation. In test market mode for a few months now, it will run for another six months or longer, depending on response, says Whitmell, who adds that word of mouth has increased the requests for the service.

This is an extension of a language initiative RBC began last summer on its website. At maps.rbc.com, a Google map connects customers to a branch where three or more people speak their language. Whitmell explains RBC wants to connect with new immigrants positively, and has a plethora of products designed to help with the transition, including finding a new home. When a customer feeds the postal code of their desired neighbourhood into RBC's findingyourhome.ca, the community corner supplies the cultural composition of the area, the average housing price, average income, schools, services, hospitals, etc., and can compare three locations based on the above criteria. The bank flashes this feature on its redesigned Welcome to Canada site, which receives 50,000 visitors every month.

This month RBC branches will release pamphlets in 14 languages and an online version of the nine important things newcomers should know about life in Canada.

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