

## Silent Swedes ... and even more silent Finns

Back when Internet billionaires were still in diapers – about 20 years ago – Sweden’s Televerket, when it was still the state monopoly telecom, ran a major advertising campaign urging people to make more phone calls.

“Look at that!” said my friend Giovanni, pointing to an ad. “The Swedish Government has to advertise to get people to talk to each other.”

Giovanni had recently arrived from Sicily. He was fascinated with many things Swedish. For example, as an economist, he had calculated that snow accounted for at least 10 percent of Sweden’s GNP. But the thing that fascinated him most was that Swedes do not talk. We would sit in the totally quiet commuter train and Giovanni would shake his head and say, “Listen to the silence – nobody’s talking.”

I explained that Televerket’s ad campaign was not a Government mental health scheme, intended to make Swedes more friendly, communicative, affectionate, warm, social and happy. It was simply because Televerket had excess phone network capacity: every additional phone call meant more profit for the state.

Giovanni spent several years in Sweden. He never could get accustomed to the fact that Swedes don’t talk. Luckily, his next assignment was not in Finland. Finns talk even less.

For example: A Finn and a Swede sit down to hoist a few. After an hour, the Swede is nicely lubricated and lifts his glass and says, “Skål!” The Finn replies: “Did you come here to talk or to drink?”

OK. Maybe that’s not true. But it is a fact that Mel Brooks’s “Silent Movie” is a parody of an Ingmar Bergman epic. Bergman’s films never give credits to sound technicians since they do so little work. Bergman’s films have less talk than laughs.

Speaking of movies, a scene in a Terry Thomas classic revealed why Finns are so quiet.

*Man knocks on the door.*

*Thomas opens it.*

*Man says, “Bonjour.”*

*Thomas says, “Oh, you’re French?”*

*Man replies, “No, I’m Finnish.”*

*Thomas asks, “Well, why don’t you speak Finnish?”*

*Man replies, “That’s too difficult.”*

Well, Swedish is simple compared with Finnish, but even Swedes who one would expect to be professional talkers don’t talk. Take Swedish politicians. They are the only

politicians in the world who hate to make speeches. If forced, they will read aloud in Parliament. The chamber is empty. The other parliament members can’t stand the noise. Oh, yeah, there was one highly unusual member of Parliament who just couldn’t stop talking. To shut her up, her colleagues voted her Speaker. The Swedish Parliament Speaker does not speak, but only bangs a gavel.

Swedish politicians have two favorite expressions when reporters twist their arms and demand they say something: “As I have said ...” which means, “I said it once, and you should have listened, and that’s enough.” And, “etcetera, etcetera,” which means, “You make up the words. I don’t want to talk any more.”

The fact that Swedes definitely need encouragement to talk – like the old telecom campaign – is clearly seen in Ericsson’s slogan, “Make yourself heard.” Of course, competitors maliciously say this is because you must shout into an Ericsson phone, which is not at all true. Nor is it true that Viagra’s ad agency originally created the slogan, with a slightly different spelling.

There are actually 637 words in Swedish for silence. But nobody says them aloud. You could look this up at the Royal Library. There’s an information desk under a big sign “Silence!” in every EU language. Submit your inquiry in writing.

So if nobody talks, how come every Swede and Finn spends every waking moment with a mobile phone pasted to his or her ear?

Here, revealed for the first time, is the answer to this long-puzzling mystery: Swedes and Finns are in manual dexterity training. They are sharpening their skills so their fingers can fly lightning fast when their mobile phones become wireless Internet terminals.

Then, they can return to their natural state of silence. They will e-mail, surf, play games, make millions of dollars in e-trading every day, transfer the profits to The Bahamas, click to buy new Volvos and Saabs, watch movies, order groceries, and – best of all – they will have tiny cameras that can send live pictures to friends around the world and they’ll have screens on which to view friends’ live pictures. All this while walking alone in a deep, soundless pine forest.

Ah, the wonderful wireless Internet: Swedish silence. Finnish serenity. No talk. □

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