

LEADER'S GUIDE

THE MULTICULTURAL CUSTOMER

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INTRODUCTION

In today's diverse and global marketplace, it is a challenge to offer ALL customers effective customer service. Customers may come from many different cultures and bring with them different ideas of what effective customer service is all about. Our service expectations are culturally determined — what is courteous in one culture may be discourteous in another. For example, today we may need to modify the way we stand or sit; communicate with customers who may not be fluent in our language; negotiate with entire families rather than individuals.

No matter who our customers are — regardless of their race, ethnicity, culture or gender — whether they are inside or outside our organization, the goals of customer service are the same: treat all people as individuals; find out their needs; meet or exceed their expectations. To satisfy our multicultural customers, we must be flexible and sensitive. We may need to spend extra time and develop extra patience. We need to adapt our traditional customer service skills to meet the variety of cultures our customers represent.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

THE MULTICULTURAL CUSTOMER is designed to help employees provide effective customer service to ALL customers. By watching the video, employees will increase their awareness of customers' different expectations. Additionally, they will learn some specific techniques to help successfully serve customers from other cultures. Throughout the program, the word "Customer" refers to ALL customers, internal and external.

THIS PACKAGE INCLUDES

One videotape, 20 minutes

One Leader's Guide

SPECIAL THANKS

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PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

After viewing the video, participants will be able to:

1. Understand the importance of effectively serving multicultural customers.
2. Identify some of the needs and expectations of multicultural customers.
3. List the interpersonal skills necessary to satisfy the different expectations of multicultural customers.
4. List some specific strategies for serving multicultural customers.
5. Identify their strengths and weaknesses in dealing with diverse customers.
6. Identify specific customer service skills which may need modifying.

PLANNING YOUR TRAINING SESSION

Before you plan your training session, take some time to review the video and this leader's guide. As you watch and read, think about the demographics of your organization's internal and external customers. What awkward situations have you personally experienced with your customers that you think resulted from different cultural expectations? How could these situations have been avoided or handled more effectively?

THE LEADER'S GUIDE: This guide will help you plan your training session. It includes an introduction to the subject and suggests questions which will help stimulate discussion and emphasize the major training points.

DESIGNING YOUR PROGRAM: To receive the most from the video, here is how we suggest you organize your training:

1. Introduce the subject by discussing the suggested questions on pages 3 and 4.
2. Show the video.
3. Summarize the major learning points.

BEFORE SHOWING THE VIDEO

INTRODUCE THE TRAINING

Why serve multicultural customers?

Discussion Questions: Why is it important to serve multicultural customers effectively? What is in it for you? What is in it for your organization?

You will need to introduce the subject of serving multicultural customers and why it is necessary to serve them successfully. Discuss the demographics of your customer base (internal and external) and share some of your personal experiences with serving multicultural customers. Emphasize that service expectations are culturally determined — what is courteous and appropriate in one culture may be discourteous and inappropriate in another.

What is culture anyway?

Discussion Questions: What are the five areas in which cultures may differ? How do they affect the way you serve your customers?

Culture is the “software” that programs the behavior of human beings. It tells us how to act in all areas of our lives. Understanding how culture impacts our behavior will have specific implications for how we treat the customers we serve. Cultures differ in five major areas which are particularly relevant to customer service:

1. How elastically or rigidly we view **Time** — Some cultures, for example, will consider it important to be on time for an appointment. In others, time is viewed much more loosely and other priorities may be more pressing than time commitments and schedules.
2. Our **Sense of Space** — personally and professionally. During conversation, some cultures stand much closer than others. Crowding would be considered normal in some cultures while crowding or touching someone you don't know would be considered rude in others.
3. Whether we value the **Individual or the Group** — Cultures which value the group make their decisions by group consensus with the benefit of the whole group in mind. In addition, people from more group-oriented cultures may find it embarrassing to be singled out, even for praise.

BEFORE SHOWING THE VIDEO (continued)

4. Whether we emphasize **Tasks or Relationships** — Some cultures want to get to know you before getting down to business. Others are all business, right away. What might seem like idle small talk in a more task-oriented culture is considered rapport building in a more relationship-oriented one.
5. The importance of **Saving Face** — The importance of saving face varies from culture to culture. To many cultures, however, preserving one's dignity and respect takes precedence over everything else. There is no culture where belittlement feels good. But, in some cultures, rejection or perceptions of inadequacy are a matter of honor and can cause shame.

What are your assumptions about people?

Discussion Questions:

1. Who are your customers? What are their demographics? What generalizations can you make about them?
2. Do any of your customers disprove your generalizations?
3. What impact do your generalizations have on your interactions with your multicultural customers? Is the impact a negative or a positive one? Why?

The three discussion questions will give participants a chance to identify and examine their assumptions. You may want to list some of these assumptions on a board or flip chart.

Assumptions and generalizations about people are necessary. They help us categorize our world. However, the assumptions we make about people determine, in large part, how we interact with them. To serve multicultural customers effectively, we need to examine our assumptions to be sure they are accurate ones.

What are your strengths and weaknesses in serving your multicultural customers?

Discussion Questions: What makes it difficult to serve your multicultural customers effectively? What do you find easy?

It is important for participants to assess their strengths and weaknesses in serving their multicultural customers. To guide them in watching the video, it will be helpful for participants to identify areas where they need to improve. They can then view the video and look for specific strategies and techniques in their areas of weakness.

SHOW THE VIDEO

AFTER SHOWING THE VIDEO

KEY TRAINING POINTS

Play the video straight through without interruption.

After the video is finished, you will need to help participants transfer the information and skills they have seen to their job.

Discuss the video's theme: *Follow Your Customer's Lead*.

To do that, you need to:

- Be Sensitive
- Be Flexible
- Spend Time
- Be Patient

Involve participants in summarizing the key points. Ask each person to share an idea about how they plan to apply each point.

Here is a list of the key training points the video includes. Since the points are scattered in no particular order throughout the video, we have categorized them for you under the four parts to effective customer service: Greet Your Customers; Establish Rapport; Determine Expectations; Follow-Up. The training points about speaking with people who may not be fluent in your language are listed separately.

1. Greet Your Customers

- Smile — a pleasant smile is seen as welcoming in most cultures.
- Smile and lightly greet the translator, if one is present.
- Identify your customer and then try to speak directly to them — NOT to the translator or the children. Remember, your customer is the person whose needs you are satisfying. Frequently, the translator and the children are only there to help.
- Address the oldest person first, especially the oldest male. Since many cultures are hierarchical, it is extremely important to identify the person who is most respected. Frequently it is the oldest male. Other times, it is the person who speaks your language most fluently.
- Greet people by name or title, if possible. Use Mr. or Mrs. If you are unsure, ask your customers how they wish to be addressed.

KEY TRAINING POINTS (continued)

- Pay attention to your appearance, face-to-face or on the telephone. Use good posture. In many cultures, good posture is viewed as a sign of power and respect. Don't lean, chew gum or yawn. When sitting, DON'T cross your legs or allow the soles of your shoes to show.
- Shake hands only when appropriate. Follow your customer's lead. Many cultures consider touching of any kind to be inappropriate business behavior.
- NEVER touch, pat or hug customers, unless they do it first.
- Be formal, NOT casual. It is always better to err on the side of formality.
- Be careful with hand gestures. They mean different things in different cultures.
- Get up when someone enters the room. Rising when someone enters is viewed as a sign of respect.

2. Establish Rapport

- Be careful about the assumptions you make. Try not to stereotype customers.
- Treat customers as individuals. *Let them lead you.* Following your customers' leads is the only way to satisfy their expectations. They will show you how they expect you to behave.
- Respect personal space — personal space differs from culture to culture. People in the U.S. and Western Europe stand about 18 inches to three feet apart. Other cultures stand much closer; still others, further away. Let your customers determine their own comfort zone.
- If appropriate, take time to get to know your customers. Let them get to know you.
- Don't take your customer's attitude or behavior personally.
- Help customers save face and avoid embarrassment. Saving face is extremely important in many cultures. It is imperative to preserve your customer's dignity and respect.

3. Determine, Meet and Exceed Customer Expectations

- Be careful about asking questions. Questions can be considered intrusive, rude or impolite. You need to watch your customers to determine whether or not your questions are acceptable.

KEY TRAINING POINTS

(continued)

- Ask open questions. They help you gain information about what your customers expect.
- If questions are considered impolite, use conversation to find out what customers want. You may need to “enter through the back door.”
- Look and listen for a “No” in every “Yes.” Remember, some cultures NEVER say “No.” A weak “Yes” response or a response like “That would be difficult” may, in reality, be a “No.” Many cultures feel saying “no” is the rudest thing they can do. Saying “no” causes YOU to lose face.
- Be sure your customers put THEIR needs BEFORE yours. Listen for statements like, “Whatever YOU think is best.” Or, “How do YOU feel about...?” Those kinds of statements mean your customers are satisfying YOU — not themselves.
- To be sure your customers understand you, watch their body language. Listen for voice tone, inflection, pauses. Smiling and laughter can also be indications of confusion. Customers think it is rude to tell you they don’t understand you. They think YOU will lose face. Body language will tell you how much or how little your customers understand.
- Avoid questions requiring only “Yes” or “No” answers. Give customers positive options. Customers dislike saying “No.” They find it rude. Ask “Which would you prefer?” rather than “Do you like this one?”
- Avoid “Tag” questions, “Is that okay?” or, “Alright?” Tag questions can be confusing to customers not fluent in your language.
- NEVER point out customer mistakes. Your customers may lose face if you do.
- Educate your customers. Say things like “I can help you you better if...” Remember, different cultures conduct business differently. What is customary and acceptable in one culture may be unacceptable in another. It is your responsibility to help your customers conduct their business with you successfully.
- Never say “No.” “No” causes customers to lose face. “I will see what I can do,” “That would be difficult,” or “I am not sure that can be arranged,” are all softer ways of saying “No.”

KEY TRAINING POINTS (continued)

- Use a time zone map. Time zone maps are very helpful since they tell you the time of day for the customer with whom you are speaking. Additionally, they can help you arrange shipping times or appointments with less chance of misunderstandings.
- Talk in 24-hour time. Like time zone maps, 24-hour time helps avoid confusion and misunderstanding about a.m. and p.m.

4. Follow-Up

Although follow-up was not dealt with in the video, the follow-up techniques mentioned below are basically the same ones we all use — whether our customers are from our own or a different culture.

- Send a letter or place a phone call to be sure your customer is satisfied.
- Find out whether further assistance is needed.

To Help Bridge Language and Accent Barriers

When speaking:

- Put a smile in your voice.
- Speak slowly and distinctly — NOT loudly. Customers may NOT be hearing impaired. They are just not fluent in your language. Speaking loudly can actually distort the translation process.
- Pause frequently to allow your customers the time to translate what you have said and think about what they want to say back to you.
- Mirror the customer's communication skills — use their vocabulary. Using the vocabulary they use increases your chances of being understood.
- Be specific. Stick to the main points. Be as clear as you can. The fewer words you use, the better your chances of being understood.
- Be organized. Present information step-by-step.
- Avoid contractions like "Didn't" or "Don't." They are too difficult to understand.
- Avoid humor and sarcasm. What is humorous in one culture may not be in another.

KEY TRAINING POINTS (continued)

- Avoid jargon, idioms or slang. They are too difficult to understand.
- Avoid “-ing” verb form.
- Use cognates (similar words in your language and theirs). For example, the word “problem” = “problema” in Spanish and would be easier to understand than the words “glitch” or “snafu.”
- NEVER laugh at a customer.
- ALWAYS restate, paraphrase, summarize and confirm. Summarizing allows you to be sure you understand your customers and they understand you. It prevents a minor misunderstanding from becoming a major concern.
- Ask for feedback to show whether or not your customer understands. Remember, customers will frequently hesitate to tell you they don’t understand. They don’t want to lose face or cause YOU to lose face.

When Listening:

- Listen actively.
- Look and listen for signs of dissatisfaction, frustration, confusion. Remember, it is embarrassing for your customers to admit they don’t understand. Are your customers calm or moving about? Are they repeating what you are saying to someone else? Who is doing the talking, you or your customer? Are your customers interrupting or asking you any questions?
- NEVER tell customers you don’t understand them. That will embarrass them and cause them to lose face. Tell your customer you want to be sure you have all the information. Ask your customers to summarize what they have said. Repeat what they said up to the part you didn’t understand.
- Listen to the whole message before deciding you don’t understand. Frequently it will become clearer as it progresses.
- Listen for “No” in every “Yes.”
- Always say “Please,” “May I,” “Thank You.”

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1635 TWELFTH ST., SANTA MONICA, CA 90404
PHONE: (310) 450-1300 FAX: (310) 450-1010
TOLL-FREE: (800) 775-5025