

Cultural Awareness Tips for Service Providers

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The challenge in providing service is that, in a multicultural world, there has been a constant blending of people and heritage. The result is that it is virtually impossible to find terms or names to accurately describe all people. This is the struggle that the U.S. Census Bureau has each time it tries to accurately categorize the people residing in the United States. In 2000, for the first time since taking census, respondents were allowed to choose more than one descriptor for their ethnic background.

While it is dangerous to generalize and lump people and cultures together when interacting with someone, there are some general characteristics and common values shared by many people from various countries and cultural backgrounds. By keeping these similarities in mind when interacting with your customers you can enhance the opportunities of successful service. Remember that the characteristics provided below are only general guidelines and DO NOT apply to all members of the groups identified. It is ALWAYS better to ask a customer their preference and observe their reactions when you need to know something about them. If you not annoyance or discomfort during a conversation, do a perception check to see if you have said or done something to cause the reaction or if there is another reason. Also, keep in mind that exposure to other cultures (acculturation) will impact what a person believes and how he or she acts. For example, a second or third generation Asian-American in the United States may relate more closely to western values than those of his or her native heritage.

The following are definitions of the cultural groups described in this section.

Hispanics, Latinos, or Chicanos includes groups that trace their origins or background to Spain, Latin America, or Mexico. Note: The U.S. Census Bureau uses the term *Hispanic* for all these groups.

African-American or Black includes groups that trace their origins or background to Africa (sub-Saharan area). The descriptive term *African-American* is often used in the United States while *Black* is often used by people in Latin America or the Caribbean.

Asians or Asian Americans includes groups that trace their origins or background to the Asian continent or to the Pacific Islands (e.g. China, Korea, Japan, or Samoa).

Native American includes groups that trace their origins or background to the continents of America.

European American, Anglo American, or White includes groups that trace their origins or background to Europe, other than Spanish.

Hispanic/Latino/Chicano cultures:

Different terms are assigned to people of Hispanic background based on the region of the world from which they originate. Each country has its own unique culture, however, because of a common heritage; they share a number of general characteristics and values. The following are some things to keep in mind when serving people from this group:

- Family and group loyalty is an important concept in many Hispanic cultures. Long-term relationships are valued;
- Women are often admired and respected, especially mothers;
- Respect for elders and authority (e.g. teachers) is important. Direct eye contact is often avoided when talking with people who are older or of higher status as a show of respect. Additionally, many people often look away rather than making direct eye contact while listening;
- Time is viewed as flexible and the concept of hurrying to meet a deadline at the expense of disregarding others and what someone values can cause problems;
- Live in the moment and want to see what happens next. Also, take a more casual, spontaneous and impulsive approach to life. This can influence buying decisions;
- Religious affiliations often strong;
- Courtesy (use of diplomacy and tact), dignity, honor, and loyalty are valued in business as well as in family affairs;
- Men tend to be more assertive than women in business although women are often more assertive and men are more aggressive in their communication approach;
- Direct argument or contradiction are typically viewed as rude and disrespectful;
- Emotions readily displayed (e.g. crying, laughing, touching, and smiling);
- Material objects are often viewed as a necessity versus an end in themselves;
- Many Hispanics are in tune with their environment. They tend to touch, smell, feel, taste, and come in close proximity with objects or people that have their attention.

African American/Black cultures:

Depending on the country of origin and personal background, there will be differences among individuals, however, there are some general characteristics shared by many African Americans or Black people.

- Emotional or expressive in communication. Voice volume and inflection is often elevated;
- Focus on unity or group is strong;
- Value close relationships with group and family;
- Assertiveness and directness common and valued;
- Religious affiliations often strong;
- Direct eye contact when speaking, rather than when listening is common. This is often as a show of respect and learned at a young age. Contrarily, a prolonged

glance may be viewed as sexual interest or disrespect, depending on the parties involved;

- Prefer more special distance when talking to others, especially strangers;
- Touching or patting of a child's head, especially by a white person, is often viewed as condescending;
- Use of nonverbal cues often limited (e.g. head nodding while listening);
- Use of direct questions is sometimes considered harassment. For example, asking an African American customer who is trying to decide between two items or choices, "Can I assist in your decision making" might appear as if you are rushing them;
- Conversations between two people who know one another are typically viewed as private. Therefore, anyone who interrupts without permission is viewed as an eavesdropping and is often rebuked. For example, if two African American customers were discussing the benefits that they recognize for an item you had shown them and you interrupted to emphasize additional benefits or features, you would likely offend them;
- When speaking to each other, conversations can get loud and animated;
- Time is viewed as flexible, not linear. Life issues may take priority over keeping appointments and many people are "present-oriented." Older African Americans tend to be more punctual and more willing to wait than their younger counterparts;
- Adoption and use of a "Black" dialect or terminology by people outside of the cultural group without authorization is often viewed as mocking and an insult.
- Interrupting during conversation is usually tolerated. Competition to speak is often granted to the person who is most assertive;
- Asking personal questions of a person met for the first time may be seen as improper and intrusive;
- Emotions not readily displayed by men (e.g. crying), especially among strangers;
- The term "you people" is typically seen as pejorative and racist;
- Men may wear sunglasses and hats indoors as adornments, much like jewelry might be worn by other groups.

Asian/Asian American cultures:

Some shared values and characteristics by people with Asian heritage include:

- "Family" is important since many Asians typically value collectivism;
- Maintaining a low personal profile and working for the betterment of family or the group is important. This can sometimes be tied to face;
- In regards to group orientation, many Asians prefer terms like "we, us, and ours" to "I, me and mine;"
- Ranks and titles are important and used;
- Face, harmony and obligation are important elements in dealing with others. Doing things that cause someone else to be embarrassed, ridiculed or put in a lower position can damage a relationship with an Asian person;

- Time and the concept of hurrying to meet a deadline at the expense of disregarding others and what they value is a foreign concept;
- Religious affiliations often strong;
- Physical contact and facial expressions are often minimal. Patting someone on the back or putting an arm around someone's shoulder in the workplace is not typically done.
- Touch between strangers, especially those of the opposite sex) is frowned upon;
- The head is often considered the residence of the soul; therefore, touching a person's head potentially places them in jeopardy or invites evil;
- Personal cleanliness is valued and expected;
- Sitting with legs crossed and the soles of feet facing someone is considered rude and insulting in a number of countries since the foot is the lowest part of the body;
- Space between individuals is often at least six inches farther than what many Westerners consider comfortable;
- Some see animated expressions or gestures as a sign of a lack of control;
- Respect and humility are key cultural values. This is often demonstrated by avoiding direct eye contact or lowering eyes when talking; especially, to someone older or who is an actual or perceived superior (socially or in the workplace);
- Privacy is valued, especially among strangers. Discussions or inquiries regarding a person's occupation, income, politics, current events, controversial topics, family life, or spouse should be avoided. Any of these could potentially lead to disharmony or a loss of face;
- Trust is a crucial element in business. Before getting down to business, you will need to spend time (possibly months and numerous meetings) to establish trust before broaching negotiations or business topics;
- An indirect style of communication is often used, along with silence. For example, instead of saying "no" (which could cause someone to lose face) to a pushy sales person, an Asian customer might agree to purchase an item. They may later regret or resent the purchase and stop doing business with an organization;
- Facial expressions are often suppressed;
- Belching after a meal is often considered a show of satisfaction;
- Some people of this group use laughter or giggling to hide embarrassment, anger, sorrow, discomfort with a situation, or displeasure. A hand is often used to cover the mouth when laughing or giggling.

European/ White/Westernized Cultures:

- Direct nonverbal communication prominent (e.g. eye contact, nodding while listening, sitting facing a speaker);
- Use of direct questions for personal information is permissible and often appreciated;
- Emotions are not publicly expressed (e.g. crying), especially among strangers;
- Hand gestures prominent during communication (e.g. "A-okay" symbol);

- Touching in public between opposite sexes is viewed as rude in many countries (e.g. England, Germany, and Scandinavia).
- Spatial distance preferences tend to be wider (in Northern Europe), especially among strangers;
- Sunglasses and hats are considered functional items to be worn only outside and removed when coming indoors;
- “Taking turns” in conversation dictates that one person has the floor until all of his or her points are made;
- Showing emotions during disagreements is perceived as the beginning of conflict which can escalate if left unchecked;
- Inquiring about jobs, family and so forth of a new customer from this group is often viewed as being friendly;
- Many cultures are past-oriented and resist change in their life;
- More individualistic in their approach to relationships or handling problems rather than relying on others;
- Long-term business relationships are often preferred over “quick sales.”
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Middle Eastern cultures:

- Emotion expressed easily (e.g. smiling, laughing, crying);
- Grief or sadness may often seem exaggerated through non-verbal gestures;
- Direct eye contact is often used to show interest and help someone understand truthfulness of another person. Failure to reciprocate is often seen as a lack of trustworthiness;
- Speaking loudly often indicates strength while a soft voice sends a message of weakness;
- Touching or passing items, especially food, with the left hand is a social insult since that is the “bathroom” hand used for toilet functions;
- In Islamic cultures, touching between genders (even hand shakes) is inappropriate; however, touching (e.g. hand holding and hugs) between the same-sex is appropriate.
- Body odors are often considered normal and appropriate (e.g. breath that smells heavily of garlic or perspiration/ body odor);
- Standing in close proximity is common when talking;
- Time is viewed as fluid; therefore, taking time to get to know someone and building trust are important elements in business. People and relationships are more important than a company or job;
- Honor and dignity are important personal characteristics; therefore, you should avoid expressing doubts or criticism about a person or their possessions when others are present;
- A circuitous speech pattern is common and it may take a while to “get to the point.” Be patient and professional while listening;
- Changes in plans, schedules, and meetings are common;

- Giving special treatment to friends and family members is considered an obligation;
- Religious festivals and events normally supersede other events and business;
- Eating pork is forbidden by law in countries where Islam and Judaism is the primary religion;
- Islamic law frowns on profiteering, therefore product pricing should not be viewed as excessive;
- Women have a lesser role in Islamic cultures and normally do not participate in business dealings. Also, when traveling in Islamic countries they are required to dress in such a way that their arms, legs, torso, and faces are concealed. This includes foreign visitors.
- Asking a host about the health of his spouse is insulting.

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