

THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL VALUES IN CUSTOMER SERVICE

©copyright by Robert (Bob) W. Lucas

While many cultures have similar values and beliefs, specific cultural values are often taught to members of particular groups starting at a very young age. This does not mean a particular group's values and beliefs are better or worse than any other culture's; they are simply important to that particular group. These values often dictate which behaviors and practices are acceptable or unacceptable. While these values may or may not have a direct bearing on serving the customer, they can have a very powerful influence on what the customer wants, needs, thinks is important, and is willing to seek or accept. Being conscious of differences can lead to a better understanding of customers and potentially reduce conflict or misunderstandings in dealing with them.

Many service providers take values for granted. This is a mistake. Values are the "rules" that people use to evaluate issues or situations, make decisions, interact with others, and deal with conflict. As a whole, one's value system often guides thinking and helps him or her determine right from wrong or good from bad. From a customer service perspective, values often strongly drive customer needs and influence the buying decision. Values also differ between cultures based on its orientation toward ethics, morals, religion, and many other factors. For example, if customers perceive clothing as too sexy or too conservative they may not purchase the items, depending on what need they are trying to meet. Or, they may not buy a house because it's in the "wrong" neighborhood.

Values are based on deeply held beliefs of a culture or subculture. These beliefs might be founded in religion, politics, or group mores. They drive thinking and actions and are so powerful that they have served as the basis arguments, conflicts, and even wars (e.g. holy wars in various parts of the world over the centuries).

To be effective in dealing with others, service providers should not negate the power of values and beliefs, nor should they perceive that their value system is better than that of someone else's. The key to success is to be open-minded and accept that someone else has a different belief system that drives his or her needs. With this in mind, you as a service provider should then strive to use all the positive communication and needs identification you have read about thus far in order to satisfy the customer.

Cultural values can be openly expressed or subtly demonstrated through behavior. They can impact your interactions with your customers in a variety of ways. To be more effective, service providers need to consider the connection of values with behavior, and how they can adjust their customer service to ensure a satisfactory experience for diverse customers.

TOP FIVE ASIAN AND AMERICAN PERSONAL VALUES

The following shows the results of one study that compared the top five personal values in a survey of 101 Asians from eight countries and twenty-eight Americans from U.S. foreign affairs offices in Washington and East Asia.

ASIAN

Hard work
Respect for learning
Honesty
Self-discipline
Self-reliance

NORTH AMERICAN

Self-reliance
Hard work
Achieving success in life
Personal achievement
Helping others

Source: David I. Hitchcock, *Asian Values and the United States: How much conflict?*, The Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., 1994, p 21-22.

The goal is to provide service to the customer. In order to achieve success in accomplishing this goal, service providers must be sensitive to, tolerant of, and empathetic towards customers. You do not need to adopt these beliefs, only adapt to them to the extent that you provide the best service possible to all of your customers.

Extracted from Lucas, R.W., *Customer Service: Building Successful Skills for the Twenty First Century*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY, 2005.

Bob Lucas B.S., M.A., M.A, CPLP is an internationally-known author and learning and performance professional. He has written and contributed to thirty-one books and compilations. He regularly conducts creative training, train-the-trainer, customer service, interpersonal communication and management and supervisory skills workshops. Bob can be reached at blucas@robertwlucas.com or through his website www.robertwlucas.com. Follow his blog at www.robertwlucas.com/wordpress and like him at www.facebook.com/robertwlucasenterprises