



MultiCultural Customer Service: Providing Outstanding Service Across Cultures

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Defining MultiCultural Customer Service

Good customer service meets the needs of our customers in ways that has value and meaning to them. MultiCultural Customer Service (MCCS) goes further in recognizing that our customer's needs and expectations may vary across cultures. Providing the same quality service to ALL customers frequently means adapting our personal delivery style and usual business practices to meet individual customer's needs. The key is in understanding the role of *culture*.

Culture is a total way of life of a group of people that is transmitted from generation to generation and is largely unconscious and complex. When we think of culture, images of language, food, dress, music and holiday celebrations come to mind. But culture's affect on behavior is much larger and subtle. For example, how rapidly we speak, how formal or informally we treat each other, how important it is to establish relationships in business and how to do that, what is humorous and how we get things done - are all influenced by culture.

Other differences that we must consider when serving multicultural customers include differences in customer expectations such as individual and family values, protocol and courtesy, communications styles (verbal and nonverbal) and logistical needs (currency, transportation, measurement systems and sizing). In my book *Multicultural Customer Service: Providing Outstanding Service Across Cultures*, I list fifty ways culture influences us.

Cultural Programming and Traps

We are *culturally programmed*. We respond, react and interact with each other based upon our culture. We interpret and translate our cultural programming in

ways that are personal. In doing so, as Service Providers, we can fall into numerous *cultural traps* when serving customers whose cultural programming is different from our own. We trap ourselves with our emotions, habits, judgments and our own ethnocentrism.

- Fear – Fear can generate frustration, anger and defensiveness; and, it may lead us to reject others. Fear causes us to move away, avoid and recoil; it creates a lack of confidence and vicious cycles of negative emotions. i.e., “*I don’t like talking to those people...they’re so loud...they make me nervous.*”
- Habits – Robotic, repetitive behavior with customers reproduces the same patterns and formulas. i.e., “*Have a nice day.*”
- Judgments - Stereotypes about groups of people often make others wrong or inadequate in some way. i.e., “*You can’t trust them...they’re so quiet and they never look you in the eye.*”
- Ethnocentrism – Our belief that our values and customs are not only right but even better than others. i.e., “*How stupid! He thinks soccer is football!!*”

Service Providers can avoid falling into these cultural traps by being *self-aware* – reflecting upon their own behaviors, how they might impact others and how they might adapt or change them in the future. By being *flexible and open*, Service Providers can adapt their service delivery style to the changing customer base and the requirements of a situation. Practicing *objectivity* - observing themselves and others, Service Providers can note behaviors without making judgments or criticisms.

Cultural Translators and the 5-Step Service Response Cycle

Service Providers need specialized training to increase their awareness, to learn skills and to practice behaviors that will make them *Cultural Translators*. Cultural Translators are Service Providers who recognize and resolve situations where cultural differences can be barriers to effective service. Most customer service training programs do not spend much, if any, time building the awareness and skills that are necessary to serve customers across cultural and language differences.

In our cross cultural training programs, we provide a tool - the *5-Step Service Response Cycle* - that assists Service Providers in adapting their delivery style and in expanding their range of possible service responses

Step 1 Assess The Service Provider assesses their interactions – looking for the possible effects of cultural programming by pushing the “pause”

button and asking questions like: What are my goals? What are my customer's goals? What cultural factors may be operating here?

Step 2 Identify Options The Service Provider identifies options previously not considered such as: What possibilities are there that I haven't considered? How can I deliver outstanding customer service in this situation with this individual?

Step 3 Act/Adapt By observing interactions with customers objectively; the Service Provider can choose to adapt their delivery style according to the cultural cues they have observed in their customers.

Step 4 Reflect on Outcome By examining the outcome of a service transaction, the Service Provider can reflect upon their ability to satisfy their customer, examine the effectiveness of the service delivery and ascertain what worked and what did not work.

Step 5 Reinforce Change After reflecting upon the outcome of a service transaction, the Service Provider determines what they would do differently in the future and what they would like to continue to develop and build upon.

At each point along the *5-step Service Response Cycle*, the Service Provider places their customer service interactions into slow motion to observe the Service Provider and Customer transaction process.

3 Steps to Getting Started Today

Organizations desiring to develop their own cultural translators should review the following 3 "A"s:

- *Assess your business reality.* Review your business need to provide outstanding service across cultures.
- *Acknowledge the need and desire to provide consistently high levels of customer service to ALL your customers.* This requires an understanding of your business reality and an understanding of the impact of culture on the customer service interaction.
- *Acquire new tools, skills, and techniques to adapt to the needs of a changing marketplace.* Apply skills and strategies to adapt delivery styles, expand range of possible service responses and recognize and resolve situations where cultural difference can be barriers to effective service.

When Service Providers are equipped with the understanding of cultural programming and can apply the specific tools and techniques of cultural

translators, they are in a better position to increase profitability by positioning your organization to attract and retain a larger portion of global and diverse customer markets and by improving current service to your existing customers.

About PRISM International, Inc.

PRISM International, Inc. is a WBENC certified, full-service provider of innovative, proven consulting services and training programs and products for Leveraging Diversity & Inclusion, Managing Talent,, Increasing Global & Cross Cultural Effectiveness and Preventing Harassing & Discriminatory Behaviors

Since 1992, PRISM has assisted over 200 organizations in 23 countries by providing a systemic process and best-in-practices performance solutions focusing on optimizing the opportunities and complexities of the workforce, workplace and marketplace.

PRISM is the parent organization of the Association of Diversity Councils, and the founder of the annual Diversity Council Conference and the Diversity Council Honors Award.

For more information about this program contact us by emailing info@PrismDiversity.com or calling 888.997.7476.