Culture and the Customer Service Experience

Berlitz Cultural Insights Series

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The Global Business Landscape

Advances in technology enable us to communicate, collaborate and provide services instantaneously 24/7 with co-workers and customers in almost any part of the world.

But do we have the cultural skill set and know-how to be truly productive in a global marketplace, provide the best customer service, and make the most of the technology that connects us?

Customers typically expect quick, polite and thorough solutions. Assumptions about how to provide that excellent customer service experience, however, vary from culture to culture and often pose a challenge.

For example, a key ingredient of quality customer service is “empathy” the identification with and understanding of another’s situation, feelings and motives. But, is it possible for someone sitting in a call center in Eastern Europe, to really put themselves in the customer’s shoes in Canada?

Understanding cultural values, behaviors and attitudes regarding service expectations and a working knowledge of social protocol and etiquette in various cultures is essential for success today. Organizations that focus on customer service require a global perspective in their approach.

Global Satisfaction Trends

Three overarching trends are driving new approaches to global customer service, according to the 2010 Global Trends report.

1. **Social media, collaboration tools and technology** connecting people around the globe, require new strategies, skill sets and mindsets and bring new pressure on companies to be more mindful of their customer service.

   A bad experience can lead to a quick blog or tweet, and can result in damage to the company’s image. It is much less expensive to deal with a routine customer complaint in a way that gives them a good experience than it is to lose a good customer.

2. **Emerging new markets**, including some of the fastest growing economies such as Ghana, Qatar, Turkmenistan and China, will provide the consumer growth engines of the future.

3. **Globalization of the labor market** will drive companies to compete for the same global brainpower and talent. Off-shoring and outsourcing are not just ways to save money, they are essential strategies to compete in the global marketplace.
The Global Customer Service Experience Dilemma

Customer service surveys conducted worldwide indicate there may be some universal expectations for service providers which are:

- Is available in a timely manner
- Is competent, knows the product, knows the customers
- Is courteous
- Creates a positive “customer experience”

While it may seem obvious that consumers want courteous, competent treatment, words like “timely”, “competent” and “courteous” are subject to cultural, regional and other personal interpretations.

For example, a customer in the U.S. might be impressed with a representative who takes control of the situation, conveys the confidence that “I can get the job done for you”, chats with the customer, gives him or her recommended choices, and maybe even throws in a joke while the issue is being resolved or the service is being rendered.

This would probably not impress a Japanese customer, who is used to a representative who speaks softly or in a higher-pitched tone, and uses honorifics and polite phrases to show respect for the customer by being humble.

A Scandinavian might prefer a straight-forward manner–service without a smile–and would feel that anything but the transaction would be excessive and too much like a hard sell.

From a business perspective, it is vital that the service provider accepts the responsibility to adapt as much as possible to the culture of the customer. Customers adapt by moving to a provider that better meets their expectations!

A positive customer service experience differs from culture to culture

“Hi, I’m Heather, and it’s my pleasure to be your server tonight. We have some really great specials I’d like to tell you about. They’re all delicious, but my personal favorite is the shrimp fajitas seasoned with cilantro and epazote; they are just fabulous!”

“I am sorry to have kept you waiting. You are very welcome here. The total is 4,757 yen. I humbly request 4,757 yen. I have certainly just received 10,000 yen. Shall I take it from 10,000 yen? Your change is 5,243 yen. I will first give you the large bills. Please confirm. Here is your (small) change and receipt. Please confirm. Thank you very much.”

Photo source: R. Mastron
Connecting with culture to solve the problem: One example

A customer’s “natural” preference is for local service and they may be more willing to pay extra for local help. For example, the Apple® iPad has a special $99 package that guarantees every time the customer calls the help desk, the person picking up the phone will be a U.S. American. Yet, many companies are offshoring or considering contact centers overseas to save money.

One American IT Services company decided to locate their global customer contact center in Sophia, Bulgaria, based on their understanding that Bulgaria is home to many sophisticated, educated young people with excellent technical skills, who are also conversant in the English language.

Beyond the usual customer service training, they offered English Language Pronunciation Training, but came to realize that the Bulgarians also needed a higher level of understanding of their customer’s actual business environment and cultural assumptions.

Berlitz was brought in to help. They found service representatives were very competent at solving customer issues, but there was a gap when it came to connecting with the customer and empathizing with their immediate situation.

A custom course was designed to help contact center representatives better understand the cultural implications of their work and boost their confidence level. The response from the service agents has been quite positive, many of them reporting new “Best Practices” in customer service that include the missing elements of connecting and empathizing with the customer from the customer’s cultural point of view.

Best Practices – especially for off-shoring and outsourcing

Some tips for providing excellent global customer service:

- Evaluate the regions where you will be providing customer service or if you have a contact center, the culture of that region. Analyze:
  - The historical perspective: is or was the area a capitalist or socialist society? How long has the culture experienced consumerism?
    - In some cultures, the customer is always right. In countries where consumerism has a strong foothold, customers have power and expect to be catered to.
    - In other countries, such as in Eastern Europe, where consumerism is not strong, customers are expected to wait in line and not make as strong demands. Consumerism may be seen less positively, while in other cultures the expectation is that if you work hard you get rewarded.
    - In India, the “service sense” is very different. Transactions are a “dance” often involving bargaining and negotiation and may even get emotional.
    - In addition, cultural differences may define our attitudes toward work entirely. Some cultures live to work while others work to live.
• **Time orientation:** how long is a pause? Is it 3 seconds or 3 minutes?
  Research shows that pauses in 10 or 30 second intervals are acceptable in Eastern Europe. In some Asian cultures pauses lasting up to 1 minute are not unusual. In the Americas a pause that extends beyond 3.5 seconds is painful and Americans try to fill that void with a conversation even if it is “chit chat”.
  Cultures who are used to a longer pause may think this is a sign of disrespect or find it unusual to carry on a conversation outside the transaction itself.
  In the U.S., if a customer service representative is on the phone and needs to put a customer on hold, it is recommended they tell the customer they need to put them on hold and ask if that is okay. In Eastern Europe, a much more transactional culture, representatives typically don’t ask permission.
  Asians on the other hand, apologize for putting a customer on hold, but don’t ask if that is okay.
  Understanding the time orientation of the culture is important.

• **Relationship vs. task orientation:** Get it done, with or without a smile.
  In the United States, a customer service representative may appear to be the customer’s “best friend” for five minutes. While they are moving towards accomplishing the service task, they are expected to appear personable and friendly.
  This approach is seen by many Eastern Europeans as ingenuine.
  In Asia, a slight, polite smile is expected, but Asians would not expect the representative to act like they are the customer’s best friend.

• **Achievement/optimism vs. Being/realism:** What does “success” mean to your customers?
  In some cultures providing a business service to a customer is seen as an extension of the customer’s business—a “if you succeed we succeed mentality”. There is a “can do” attitude that is expected; let’s work as a team and solve it together—as partners. Service representatives are expected to feel connected to the achievement of solving a problem.
  In Europe, where there is a more “realistic” approach, customer service representatives expect to help solve the problem and move on. In cultures where there is more “realism” representatives simply ask you about your problem and tell you “here is what you need to do to solve your problem”.
  In Asia, representatives show strong personal responsibility for a customer’s problem and would not expect the customer to be part of the resolution.

• **Formality vs. Friendliness:** From “Yes, sir” to “How’s it going?”
  The level of formality vs. friendliness varies from country to country and culture to culture. For example:
  - In the U.S., it is not unusual for a customer service representative or sales person in a store to ask “How are you? Are you finding everything ok? Or “Did you find what you were looking for?”

*The most satisfied customers go out of their way to actively try to convince others to do business with you. Unfortunately, dissatisfied customers make it a point to tell others to stay away, and dissatisfied customers are significantly more vocal. — JD Power and Associates*
This would not play as well in England or Scotland where consumers do not expect to be approached without prompting.

In Asia, representatives would greet customers and then back off. There is a certain “distance” in some cultures which others may perceive as “stiffness”.

Northern Europeans are more formal and the transaction itself is important, not service with a smile. Just providing the service is enough.

Asians also treat their customers with more formality.

- **Directness vs. indirectness:** “The problem is operator error” or “Many people have experienced this”

Many countries such as Germany, Russia, Israel and Northern European countries use a much more direct approach to help customers. Language used may include “This is where you went wrong,” or “Your idea is off track.”

North Americans may be much less direct and package their responses with temperance and words that validate the other person. Examples include “Let’s try this solution,” or “Let’s try it this way.”

Issues are resolved differently in cultures where there is individual accountability vs. where there is group accountability such as in Japan. In Japan an issue may be resolved by going to a supervisor, consulting peers, or even bring in a third party as all parties are involved together.

- **Hierarchical vs. egalitarian:** “The customer is King”, or “I am an extension of your business”

In some cultures, they “partner” with customers putting them on an equal footing. In addition, representatives avoid the word “problem” and use words like “issue” or “challenge” instead.

This may be seen as impolite or disrespectful by other cultures. In Japan, for example, customers are treated “politely” and customers are put more on a pedestal than treated equally.

Customer service representatives need to be trained to understand and adapt to the cultural orientations of their customers.

- Allow for pride in one’s own country’s achievements, history and culture and a balanced understanding of both the good and the bad of the customer’s achievements, history and culture.

- Develop a set of Best Practices that will accommodate all cultures of the global business partnership, and optimize the advantages of each.
About Berlitz Corporation

Learning centers around the globe

Berlitz Corporation is a global leadership training and education company headquartered in Princeton, U.S.A. and Tokyo, Japan. With a strong global presence, Berlitz has more than 550 locations in over 70 countries. Founded in 1878, Berlitz has long been established as the world’s premier provider of language and cross-cultural training services. Today Berlitz offers a comprehensive portfolio that includes communications skills development, global leadership training and scalable customized business solutions enabling individuals and organizations to leverage diversity through inclusive leadership, and work and lead successfully in today’s complex global marketplace.

Berlitz also serves the consumer market and provides educational services through study abroad programs and Berlitz Kids programs for children and teens. Berlitz programs can be delivered through facilitated sessions face-to-face, live online via the Berlitz Virtual Classroom®, or through web-based self-directed or blended options. For more information on Berlitz programs and services visit www.berlitz.com.

About the Author

Sue Shinomiya is a consultant, corporate trainer, coach, author, and webinar leader specializing in global effectiveness for corporations and individuals. Her 25 years in the intercultural field have included nearly a decade in Asia. Her clients have included global Fortune 500 companies representing a range of industries. She has conducted cultural and business programs in the Americas, Europe and Asia.