

MULTICULTURAL CUSTOMER SERVICE

By Michael "Soon" Lee, MBA

Minorities are the fastest-growing consumer group in America. They are currently one-third of the population and will be over half by 2050. Multicultural Americans buy over \$2 trillion in goods and services annually and if your business is to survive the next decade you will have to make some significant changes in the ways in which you interact with this changing customer base.

When dealing with culturally diverse customers you need to know exactly who you're dealing with. It's not enough, for example, to know that you have Asians. In fact, Asians are composed of 17 major distinct cultural groups including the Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, Vietnamese, and many others. They're all very different and unique and many of them don't even get along with each other. Over the years, they may even have been at war with each other at various times in history.

It's the same with Hispanics. People from Puerto Rico are not the same as those from Cuba who are not the same as Latinos from Mexico or South America. The cultures, food and even type of Spanish spoken can vary from country to country. Again, you really have to know specifically who you're working with because you'll want to customize services to meet every customer's unique needs – if you want them to do business with you.

Most companies in the United States assume that people from diverse cultures only want to do business with people from their own culture. Nothing could be further from the truth.

However, what is a fact is that some retailers turn off minority customers from the very moment they meet them without even knowing it. As an example, we Americans tend to assume that everyone wants to be greeted with a firm handshake. It never crosses our minds that many people, especially new immigrants, don't want to have their hand shaken as it can be extremely uncomfortable for them.

For instance, if a customer is an older woman from India or a traditional Japanese or Middle Eastern woman, it could be very offensive to be touched by anyone who is not their husband. Many other cultures are very uncomfortable with shaking hands just because they just aren't familiar with the custom. In fact, Americans assume that shaking hands is done by everybody in the universe when, in fact, shaking hands is not the most popular form of greeting around the world - it is the bow.

It's obvious that if you make people, regardless of culture, uncomfortable from the very first moment you meet them you're not starting your relationship on very firm footing. This does not bode well if you want to sell them a product or service.

We have also got to stop assuming that everyone knows how to use everyday items, such as electronics, because they may not be so commonplace in other parts of the world. Ask customers if they would like you to demonstrate it for them.

Differences in personal space is another cultural issue Americans don't seem to appreciate. In this country we shake hands and then stand about 2-1/2 feet apart to talk about a purchase. Unbeknownst to us, other cultures may be much more formal. The Japanese, for example, shake hands or bow, and then step back to about four feet. To us, this distance feels like the Grand Canyon so in order to feel more comfortable an American salesperson naturally steps forward violating the other person's personal space. This feels horrible for the Japanese customer so he naturally steps back causing the American to step forward. This game continues over and over again resulting in the American chasing the customer over the store! During this "dance" do you think the Japanese buyer hears much of what the salesperson is saying?

On the other hand, there are other cultures that stand much closer to each other than Americans do. In many groups, they will hug you or kiss you on both cheeks and just stand there about six inches away from your face. In this case the American is likely to step back because she is likely to feel her personal space is being violated. This is too much distance for the customer so he will naturally step forward chasing the salesperson over the store. The result is that neither party will feel very comfortable during this exchange.

We Americans tend to want to do things the way we're used to, and forget to adjust our behavior to meet our customers' needs. There's absolutely no customer service in that, especially when it comes to cultural sensitivity.

American businesses have also got to realize that they might have to modify their products and services to meet the unique needs of other cultures. People from other cultures don't necessarily buy things the same way as everybody else. For example, home builders are just beginning to adjust their floor plans to take into account issues of Feng Shui or how energy flows inside a home. They're also learning that the direction a home faces can be significant to some cultures. Even house addresses can be lucky or unlucky. I have helped builders discover that by making small, sometimes very inexpensive changes to their product, they can attract a whole new market of buyers to their homes.

Cosmetic manufacturers in the United States are just now beginning to formulate products especially for Asians, Hispanics and African Americans. It's amazing how color blind we have been since black-owned companies have been doing this for over a hundred years.

Even pricing and packaging products can attract or repel different cultures. A price like \$44.44 could be very bad luck to Asians and wrapping packages in purple color paper could signify death to Hispanics. Again, American businesses have just got to learn about cultural differences and adjust our practices.

Being sensitive to the needs of the multicultural customer simply says, "We care." Isn't that the goal of customer service? When you show people you care, they will come back to you over and over again. And eventually that lowers your marketing costs and increases your profitability.

We have to teach our salespeople that there are distinct and unique cultural differences and to stop assuming that everyone is comfortable doing things the way that we do. We Americans also have a rather nasty habit of assuming that if other people do something that's different from what we're used to it's somehow wrong. Cultural differences are not wrong – they're just different.

Remember, if you want to do more business with multicultural Americans you must remember The Global Rule™: If you take the time to learn the unique needs of multicultural customers and it will improve your bottom line.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Michael "Soon" Lee, MBA, is an expert in diversity. He speaks internationally on overcoming cultural differences and is the author of a series of books on marketing to people from diverse cultures including Asians, Hispanics, African Americans, Middle Easterners and Europeans. Michael is the first Asian American to earn the Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) designation in the 25-year history of the National Speakers Association. He consults with companies on diversity, EEOC compliance, and coaches executives on avoiding harassment complaints. Mr. Lee can be reached at (800) 41-SPEAK (77325) by e-mail at: Michael@EthnoConnect.com.