

Customer Service in a Shrinking World



by Doug Lipp

THE SKI SEASON WAS about to start, and the marketing department of a major California ski resort could hardly wait. During the summer months of the off-season, they had saturated the Chinese-speaking community in the San Francisco Bay Area with advertisements promoting the resort. All advertisements were written in perfect Chinese, appeared in local Chinese newspapers and magazines, and made a special offer: "Bring this ad to our rental department and receive a 2 for 1 discount on rental equipment for the day."

The snow fell, the resort opened, and the crowds began to pour in. The rental department was filled with customers, many of whom were Chinese with discount coupons in hand. Unfortunately, the resort had not staffed the rental shop with anyone who spoke Chinese, and most of the rental staff had no idea what the coupons were good for. The only non-Chinese portion of the advertisement said: "50 percent off!" 50 percent off what? Was each coupon good for one person or a whole family? Within minutes, employees were in a state of panic, and their customers were up in arms. They ran out of smaller-sized boots, skis, poles and snowboards well before all of the customers had been helped. Since employees could not communicate in Chinese, they had to rely upon some bi-lingual Chinese customers to interpret for them. The crowd of frustrated customers disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

The success of the marketing department had turned into a customer service nightmare. All of this could have been avoided.

Thanks to advances in communication, the maturation of the Internet and e-commerce, and ease of travel, the globe is shrinking, and the number of potential customers is expanding. The ability to communicate instantly and inexpensively opens up tremendous opportunities for reaching groups of people who come from different coun-

tries and cultures. Some of these potential customers live overseas in foreign markets with unique needs; however, many reside in the same country, or even the same community as a company. In the U.S. domestic market, for example, many customers are foreign-born, or are themselves the children of immigrants.

This means a huge population of potential customers probably lives near your business. Yet, these potential customers who come from various cultures and speak English as a second language, often have expectations of service that differ from what you

*"The Globe is shrinking.
Is your business expanding?"
— Doug Lipp*

offer. Cultural insensitivity dramatically reduces the size of the customer pie. When you aren't sensitive to the differences and special needs and interests of members of diverse cultural groups, you create a negative cycle that shows up in three ways:

- *First, you create a culture or environment that doesn't welcome people who come from different cultural groups.* Your employee population doesn't diversify, and the result is a lack of originality and creativity in the development of new products, services, and marketing strategies.
- *Second, given the narrow focus of the product line or service strategy, you discourage new customers from different cultural groups from purchasing a product or using a service in the first place.* Or after a purchase, your customers may be disappointed in the product or service they do receive and don't continue using or buying it.
- *Third, you look at the small num-*

ber of customers from different cultural backgrounds and wonder why you are developing culturally appropriate product lines and service strategies and hiring bi-lingual employees to serve this population when the target audience doesn't buy what you are selling. By not thinking globally to sell locally, many companies are losing existing customers and many potential customers. They don't understand what people from different cultures expect. At best, they fail to consider the unique needs or expectations of these customers because of cultural ignorance—a sort of benign neglect. At worst, they refuse to adapt their goods or services because they do not think it is even necessary. This is cultural arrogance. When operating from a position of cultural ignorance, these companies do not purposely design products or policies to drive away customers who come from different countries or cultures. Instead, because they haven't taken the time to consider, or meet, the unique needs of these customers, they mistakenly drive them away or into the arms of the competition.

Flexibility is the Key

The values and behaviors common to one culture are not necessarily accepted by another. What can be done to recognize these values and behaviors? And, once recognized, what adjustments need to be made? A flexible approach or practice means you take into account the needs of your employees and customers who are foreign born or represent minority cultures. Areas to assess could include your product line, marketing strategies, personnel policies, management style, return policies, foreign language proficiency of employees, signage, and website design.

During your assessment, remember that any adjustments or cultural compromises you choose to make represent a way of building a bridge between your operating policies and the needs of your customers. This is done through seeking a mutually-acceptable "cultural sense" instead of a potentially divisive "one size fits all" approach.

Customer service is the only area left for many companies to leverage themselves against their competitors. Those companies that are equally comfortable with domestic and international customers will reap big benefits. SME

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ACTION: Make your market more culturally diverse.