

The Changing Face of the Customer

Think globally, sell locally.



by Doug Lipp

WHAT CAN WE LEARN from a coffee house, an airline, a golf course and a ski resort? Plenty. Like many corporations, Starbucks Corporation, Continental Airlines, The Pebble Beach Company and Northstar-at-Tahoe share a common challenge: They are all in mature markets and offer a commodity that is widely available from competitors.

However, unlike many of their competitors, these companies have the ability to develop and maintain incredibly lucrative markets in areas that are often overlooked. Their secret? They are attentive to the needs of customers and employees who represent diverse cultural and linguistic populations.

Customers from around the world are changing the way business is done at home. In the U.S., the immigrant population is 13 percent of 284 million people. These numbers will grow.

Learn From the Best!

Any company, large or small, can reap tremendous benefits by catering to a culturally diverse customer and employee base. Companies that have gone through the process of transforming a local service or product into one that is attractive to both local and international customer alike face issues ranging from simply translating instruction brochures into other languages, to completely altering a product line or business philosophy.

Consider the following three points when reading these examples:

- 1) Learn from others' experiences.
- 2) Consider the variety of strategies, large and small, for creating an environment of global service to both customers and employees.
- 3) Assess the effectiveness of your own approach with your multinational customer and employee base.

- **Starbucks:** Pioneer of the coffehouse and specialty coffees, Starbucks transformed a commodity product into international success. One of their stores, in Orange County, California, increased business by 1,000 percent in four months for less than \$500! How? By being attentive to the needs of a linguistic minority,

the deaf and hard-of-hearing customer. Based upon a single meeting with a group of 30 to 40 deaf customers who stopped by on Friday evenings, they simplified the process of ordering coffee in their store to meet the needs of this group.

Starbucks even decided to alter one of its long-standing operating procedures. Rather than writing the customer's name and drink on the cup itself and then calling out the customer's name to let them know the order is ready, the team decided to use a red pen to write the customer's name and order on the cup. When one of the drinks with red ink was ready, an employee who was hired because of his ability to use sign



language would be summoned to step up and call the customer appropriately.

The reward: In less than four months, the small group of hearing-impaired customers grew to an event that attracts between 300 and 600 hearing-impaired customers!

- **Continental Airlines:** This airline has gone "from worst to first" in customer satisfaction in the last five years and is a pioneer in providing innovative service across cultures. It grew its Latin American market four-fold during this period by making changes. One was relatively inexpensive, yet led to tremendous customer satisfaction. Continental created a group of professional chefs they called the Congress of Chefs to assess, then create in-flight meals that would appeal to a wide variety of tastes.

- **The Pebble Beach Company:** Founded in 1919, the internationally-renowned premier golf resort doesn't rest on its laurels. With both a multi-

lingual employee and customer base, the company has taken a proactive approach to accommodate this diversity. They sponsor free English classes in the evenings for their employees so their multinational employees feel more comfortable using English and greeting guests. Also, when conducting performance reviews for employees who have limited English skills, the company provides professional interpreters. For guests who come from all over the world, they created a database of those employees who speak languages in addition to English. The concierge desk has the list, so an employee who is interacting with an international guest knows that help with interpreting is just a phone call away.

- **Northstar-At-Tahoe:** Ranked as a top 10 family ski resort, Northstar also attracts the elite skiers in South America by using two strategies:

Strategy #1: They hired professional ski instructors from Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. According to their marketing director: "Our winter is their summer and some of the best skiers and wealthiest skiing families hate to wait for the next season". The ski instructors instantly became ambassadors of goodwill and spread the word to professional ski organizations and ski tour operators in their home countries that Northstar was the place to visit in the United States. The practice of hiring ski instructors solved another problem plaguing many ski resorts in the United States; Getting qualified ski instructors is extremely difficult.

Strategy #2: They expanded on their strength as a family-friendly resort by marketing themselves as sensitive to the needs of South American guests.

As a result, the resort has grown four-fold in two years, with most of the growth potential yet to come.

Customers and employees want both products and services that meet their unique cultural, linguistic, and physical needs. Hence, you need to be flexible and adapt to the multiple demands of an ever-changing labor force and customer base. If you accept and act upon this reality, you will reap the benefits of a stable workforce and expanded, loyal customer base. The demographic pie is growing. Do you deserve a piece? **SSE**

Doug Lipp is the author of *The Changing Face of Today's Customer: Strategies for Attracting and Retaining a Diverse Customer and Employee Base in Your Local Market* (Longstreet Press). This article is adapted with permission from his book. www.douglipp.com

