

Working with Customer Diversity

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Customer Diversity

Whether you are working in a customer service calling center serving a global audience, or staffing the customer service desk in a neighborhood retail store, you will most certainly be working with a wide mix of customers. You will encounter different languages, cultural backgrounds, age groups, genders, and communication styles. Almost everyone you interact with will have a different preference for interpersonal modes and customs. As a skilled customer service worker, it will be your duty to connect with them in the way that best serves their needs, and your company's interests, while making your job performance as effective as possible.

Chances are you already have developed solid skills for communicating across cultural and demographic differences. Within your family, you may have a more informal way of communicating with siblings and cousins, while offering more respectful deference towards your older parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents. As a student, you likely had a number of different cultural backgrounds in the classroom, coming from a different heritage, social customs, and religious beliefs. You may not have had to change your own mode of interaction, but you were still able to find common ground to get along and possibly even form friendships.

As a customer service worker, you will need to modify your method of interaction to communicate well with your differing customers. Some may prefer you to assume a more authoritative communication style, with you taking control of the interaction from start to finish. Others may expect a more subservient approach, allowing them to lead the interaction up to the point where you are expected to resolve the matter with a deferential tone, perhaps even with a *yes sir*, or a *yes ma'am*. The primary goal is to achieve a satisfied customer, with minimum effort and maximum results on your part.

For example, people coming from different nations and cultures have various levels of the *power-distance* dimension—or the distances they believe to exist between different levels of a society. Some cultures have a very high power-distance perspective, and they may well treat you with a certain disregard or even disdain. Cultures with a lower power-distance dimension may see you as a social equal, and will treat you with the same courtesy and respect you offer them in return. A large part of your job is not to judge the merits of cultural differences or change them, but to accommodate them in a way—within reason—that best serves your customer.

One of the biggest errors you might make is to try to apply your own cultural beliefs without modification to every customer from every background, which will most certainly lead to frustrated efforts, conflict, bad service, and ultimately a lost customer for your business. As time goes by and with experience, you will become ever better at reading your customers and swiftly modifying your approach as necessary to accommodate the differing demands of a situation.

Serving Diverse and Multicultural Customers

There are a number of tactics you can try to ensure the best communication across linguistic, cultural, demographic, and other differing characteristics. The most important of these is, don't assume your listeners understand your explanation of an issue simply because they may smile, nod their heads, or say yes when you ask them if you've made yourself clear. Yes may be the only word they can say with any confidence.

We take many things for granted: the slang and idioms of our language, the specific vocabulary of a trade, a pace of speaking most non-native speakers find way too fast. To communicate with a non-native English speaker, be sure to use simple standard English. Keep your messages brief. If it doesn't seem a word or phrase is understood by your listener, try rephrasing it one or two other ways. Use short bits of information, and confirm understanding before you go on. If you have a member on your team who speaks your customer's language and can help, that's all the better.

Be very careful with humor or slang that doesn't translate well across cultures; even if they understand words, they may not understand the context. If you laugh, they may think you are laughing at them, rather than at a joke they don't understand. What you may interpret as wit, they may interpret as an insult.

Also be careful with your gestures. In many cultures, the *OK* sign or a *thumbs-up* may be also taken as an insult. Some cultures are very reserved with their physical movements and body language. Other cultures may gesticulate vividly without meaning to convey agitation.

The most effective way of approaching the diversity of customers you will be interacting with is to apply the Two Golden Rules of Customer Service: 1) *find out what customers want*, and 2) *treat them how they want to be treated*. Try to approach all interactions with a foremost desire to satisfy a customer, setting aside any of your own rigid opinions of how things should be done. Most of all, you should offer respect for the diverse behaviors and different customs among your customers, even though you may not understand (or even approve of) them.

If you can relax, enjoy, and even learn from the rich cultural and social differences you encounter, you will be well on your way to skillfully serving the wide spectrum of customers you are likely to engage.

Summary:

- Customer service workers should be comfortable interacting with a wide range of cultural and demographic differences.
- Forms of verbal and nonverbal communication may need to be adjusted according to the cultural comfort of a customer.
- Use of humor, gestures, and levels of assertive behavior are culturally sensitive.
- An effective approach to customer service is to discern how customers want to be treated, and then treat them that way.
- Professionally objective customer services worker will set aside their own preconceived notions of correct behavior, while respecting the cultural or demographic differences of the customers they serve.