

## 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 broad range 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 (CSW), it will be your duty to connect with them in the way that best serves their needs, and your company's interests, in the most efficient and effective way 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 greater deference to your parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents. As a student, you likely had classmates from a number of different cultural backgrounds, coming from different heritages, 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 in order to get along and possibly even form friendships.

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As a CSW, 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 (respectful) control of the interaction from start to finish. Others may expect a more passive 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 employ to ensure optimal communication with regard to linguistic, cultural, and demographic factors. 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. If your customer is a non-native English speaker, it's possible "yes" may be the only word he or she 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 speaking rate most non-native speakers find excessively fast. To communicate with a non-native English speaker, be sure to use simple Standard English. Keep your messages brief. If it seems your listener misunderstands a word or phrase, 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 does not translate well across cultures; even if your customer understands the words, he or she may not understand the context or

implied meaning. If you laugh, they may think you are laughing at them, rather than at a misunderstood joke. What you may interpret as wit, they may interpret as an insult.

Also, be careful with your gestures. Many cultures perceive the *OK* sign or a *thumbs-up* as insults. 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 to approach customers' diversity 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:**

- CSWs should be comfortable interacting with people from a wide range of cultural and demographic backgrounds.
- The CSW might need to adjust forms of verbal and nonverbal communication 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 accordingly.
- Professional and effective CSWs will set aside preconceived notions of "correct" behavior while respecting the cultural or demographic differences of the customers they serve.