Exemplary Customer Service Around the World

By Jenny Castelino
When it comes to providing exceptional customer service around the world, many individuals assume that treating others the way they themselves want to be treated will guarantee success. The problem with this approach is that individual perceptions of exceptional customer service vary greatly from culture to culture. What is perceived to be fantastic service in one culture may be anathema to another. Without having a firm grasp on these differences, the best of intentions can often fall short of a client’s expectations—costing you respect, trust, and future business.

Relocation professionals know that stellar customer service is the key to success, since it is the cornerstone of our existence. It can impact not only brand perception, but also the ability to retain clients. Relocation professionals may think they have done an exceptional, professional job, while their assignees might feel disappointed or, even worse, disrespected. The representative may not even be aware of the discrepancy, since “respectful” behavior may mean different things to different cultures, as indicated in the examples below, and may cause conflict and miscommunication if not addressed openly.

Recently, a Singaporean co-worker, Alex, told me about an issue she and her British husband were having when they needed to discipline their child, Kara. Whenever Alex was scolding Kara, she would chastise the child if she made eye contact because, in Singapore, this is considered to be disrespectful. Meanwhile, if Alex’s husband was providing the discipline, he would scold Kim because she wasn’t looking him in the eye, saying, “Look at me when I’m talking to you! Don’t you realize it’s disrespectful to not look people in the eye when they’re talking to you?” The child, meanwhile, remained confused, not knowing whether to look or not look when being spoken to, because “respect” looked very different to two parents from different cultural backgrounds.

Similarly, cultural differences led to discord when a Chinese assignee and her American husband were getting ready for work each morning. She had repeatedly tapped and nudged her husband’s leg to access the cabinet under the bathroom sink that they shared, daily, when she needed various sundries. After days of this, he finally expressed his frustration with her. “Can you at least say ‘excuse me,’ and ‘thank you’ when I move?” he asked, exasperated. Based on his value set, he felt that this would be the considerate thing to do. The assignee, however, was thoroughly offended. Where she came from in China, “please” and “thank you” are reserved for people outside of one’s familiar, more comfortable family circle, where such formalities aren’t required. To her, having to say “please” and “thank you” to her own husband meant that he was treating her as an outsider.

WHY CULTURE MATTERS IN MOBILITY MANAGEMENT

When it comes to relocating people around the world, cultural differences determine three things: customer expectations of service, communication style preferences, and preferred problem resolution approaches. Just as in personal relationships, these expectations can make or break business affiliations, and this is why cross-cultural awareness and competency are critical to providing exceptional customer service.

In analyzing national cultural preferences, it is important to be able to differentiate between a generalization and a stereotype. While we can observe a general tendency for nationals of one culture to show a greater preference for a particular cultural behavior in comparison to another (generalization), we cannot assume that this will always be the case (stereotype). While cultural upbringing has a very real influence on an individual’s values, communication styles, and perceptions, additional factors can influence an assignee’s customer service expectations. Educational backgrounds, generational commonalities, religious backgrounds, professional environments, and social upbringing all influence perception and behavior.

Experience may show, for example, that many German assignees typically prefer a direct, task-oriented communication style, but account representatives shouldn’t assume that their next German transferee will be strictly time-focused or use direct communication. Depending on where the assignee was educated and raised, and what generation the transferee belongs to, there can be small to significant deviations from those standard cultural behaviors. Still, understanding general cultural differences can inform better customer service practices, since cultural norms play such a significant role in a person’s development.

LEVERAGING CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCY FOR SERVICE EXCELLENCE

When working with assignees from different cultures, relocation professionals should consider a variety of factors in their interactions.
TASK ORIENTATION VS. RELATIONSHIP-ORIENTATION

In certain cultures, there tends to be a greater focus on time, getting right down to business and completing tasks on time and according to specifications. Assignees who have a task-oriented cultural preference will bestow trust on those who respond in the same way. Contracts form the cornerstone of any agreement.

Other cultures, however, are very relationship-oriented. Many of these are found in Africa, to some extent in parts of Asia, and in certain parts of the Middle East and Latin America. In relationship-oriented countries, developing a degree of personal familiarity will be necessary before business issues surrounding the relocation can be addressed.

How might the relocation professional determine which type of person a client or assignee is? One clue can be found by reviewing any existing email correspondence. Is the contact using bullet points or more descriptive content? Does the client get right down to business without divulging anything that might be happening in his or her personal life? Is the person very focused on time frames and when a response can be expected, or are you given a degree of latitude?

Task-oriented cultures also view time as an asset that needs to be carefully managed. I was once told a story about an American senior executive who planned to give a presentation at 8:30 a.m. in Singapore. When she arrived at the conference room, she was frustrated to find that no one was there. She elected to start her presentation to an empty room. As the audience proceeded to file in between 8:35 and 8:50, she was visibly upset, perceiving the lack of punctuality as disrespectful. To the Asian employees, however, this customary grace period was quite expected.

When interacting with individuals from certain cultures—Middle Eastern or Indian, for example—relocation professionals may wish to allocate more time than they typically would for meetings and presentations. Scheduling meetings for an earlier time than the host expects can also be beneficial—for example, scheduling a presentation for 8:45 a.m. in hopes of starting at 9. At the very least, it will accommodate multiple expectations; at most, it may even allow some time for developing stronger relationships.

Depending on average age and cultural tendencies, individuals with whom relocation professionals deal can range from very private people to those who prefer familiar and friendly communication. Respecting those differences is key to building relationships and gaining respect.

DIRECT VS. INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

In direct cultures, people generally say what they mean and mean what they say, very directly. The onus is therefore on the communicator to select the right words, because the receiver of that communication is going to believe what is said, word for word, and then act accordingly.

However, in indirect cultures—Japanese, Korean, and Chinese, for example—body language, nonverbal cues, and even silence also hold meaning. Implicit communication requires both the communicator and receiver to be aware of the context of what is being said, how it is being communicated, and the content. If an assignee is silent, for example, is he or she dissatisfied, or possibly considering what has been said? If a destination service provider makes a statement, can it be taken at face value?

This direct/indirect preference may result in some assignees being comfortable giving direct feedback regarding all parts of their relocation, whereas others may not.

If we consider many parts of Asia, for example, when someone promises to “try to” resolve an issue, this can actually mean there won’t be a resolution at all. It’s important to recognize that this isn’t intended to be misleading or dishonest. The promise of trying is stated in an attempt to show respect and not “lose face”—something that is highly valued in that culture. The communicator assumes the receiver understands that a resolution isn’t likely, while an individual unfamiliar with this standard cultural response is still expecting a positive outcome. Without each party understanding the other’s motivation, it’s unlikely a positive relationship will be established.

A conflict between these two styles of communication is evident in the example of a French executive who was charged with overseeing a staff that consisted of Asian and Indian employees. Each time he would give a complex project to his team, he would ask if they were clear on expected outcomes. Despite the team expressing their understanding of the scope of the projects, they were consistently late in meeting their deadlines, and results showed a lack of understanding of the work expected. The executive was frustrated as to why his team didn’t simply state that they were confused. What he failed to realize was that, if any member
of his team asked for further explanation or clarity, their perception was that they were pointing out their leader’s failure to explain the expectations properly the first time.

**HIERARCHAL VS. EGALITARIAN VIEWS**

In some cultures, people view relocation professionals as service providers. In other cultures, we’re viewed as equals who happen to deliver the service they require. Others consider us to be experts whose opinions should be deferred to. To determine where assignees or clients may fall along this spectrum, it helps to observe the level of formality they use in correspondence and communication. Does the individual contact you directly or use a personal assistant? Does the assignee use first names or titles? Does this change as the relationship progresses? In Germany, for example, individuals may know each other for many years and still not be on a first-name basis.

Additional clues can be found when examining whether or not collaborative language is used. For example, when an issue arises, one individual may ask how you will handle it together, versus asking you what you plan to do. The relocation professional should also take note as to whether or not assignees involve their spouse or partner or, rather, make all decisions independently.

All of these clues can guide successful communication between the relocation professional and individuals from varying cultural backgrounds. Observation is key—rather than making assumptions, which can sabotage client-assignee relationships.

**GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES**

Increasingly, as millennials are entering the workforce, relocation professionals need to be mindful of how this generation prefers to communicate. For example, typically I have found that they prefer shorter calls and emails and have an affinity for self-service—the ability to find what they need, click a button, and work independently within their own time frames. Other generations prefer the convenience of having the work done for them. Providing more service to a millennial can elicit the perception that we’re “complicating things,” whereas providing less service to other generations can evoke the question, “What am I paying you for, then?” While some generations prefer the online process, others still prefer face-to-face or personal contact with another human being. Knowing which to provide is crucial if we want to maintain strong relationships.

Additional generational differences include views on whether or not it is acceptable to bring a mobile device into a meeting—and whether or not using the device is appropriate or inappropriate—what level of digital multitasking is appropriate during a workday, or what an appropriate dress code might be.
LINGUISTIC ABILITY
While many individuals around the world can speak English, the reality is that some may not feel as comfortable with the language as others. When speaking with individuals whose native language isn’t English, it’s important to watch the use of jargon and terms that may mean something to a native English speaker but not to anyone else. Slowing one’s pace and enunciating clearly goes a long way when it comes to more effective communication. I also recommend following up with an email, preferably with bullet points, that summarizes the discussion. This gives individuals a chance to catch anything that they may have missed during the conversation. If your contact isn’t fully comfortable with English, he or she may prefer to communicate altogether via email.

DIFFERING VALUES
When addressing the customer service needs of individuals from different cultures, it’s also important not to assume that your value sets are the same as the assignees’. For example, assuming that an assignee will love a home because you’re impressed by its spaciousness and large yard would be a mistake if the assignee comes from a culture where economy and minimalism are prized. Giving too many options will be sure to backfire with an assignee whose culture fosters the belief that your expertise will guide him or her to a single, best choice—as will providing a single choice or price to an assignee who comes from a culture where both choices and bargaining are expected and welcomed.
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**BECOMING A CULTURAL DETECTIVE**

What if the relocation professional hasn’t been provided with cross-cultural training but needs to facilitate an aspect of an assignee’s move anyway? When not knowledgeable about an individual’s cultural norms and customs, representatives can still foster successful interactions and mutual respect by employing a few simple tips. My advice to relocation professionals includes:

- **Trying to find common priorities.** Typically, all assignees want to ensure that they find a suitable home, that their kids get a place at the appropriate school, and that their shipment arrives on time and intact.

- **Avoiding surprises.** If something does go wrong, fix the problem quickly, asking assignees beforehand what outcomes they’ll need to see to be satisfied with the solution.

- **Changing from a reactive to an anticipatory approach.** Whenever relocation professionals can anticipate that a problem may be brewing, I recommend communicating immediately to identify and resolve the problem from the moment they suspect that there will be an issue. Additional anticipatory approaches include asking clients and assignees what type of communication they prefer, in addition to the frequency of contact with which they are comfortable at each phase of the move.

- **Utilizing mirroring techniques.** Based on the communication styles an assignee exemplifies, relocation professionals can take cues as to an assignee’s preferences. Consultants should be vigilant, observing whether the assignee tends to communicate in short bullet points or longer emails. Do they invite you to address them by their first names or not? Do they invite informal discussion and try to develop a personal relationship with you, or are they focused purely on the process? If these preferences are not obvious, it’s also wise to simply ask, “How often would you like me to keep you informed about the relocation? Would you prefer that I touch base on general milestones, or would you prefer details and being copied on all emails throughout the process?” By asking specific questions and observing an individual’s behavior, the relocation professional can more easily anticipate best practices on a case-by-case basis.

**WIDENING OUR FOCUS**

Larry L. Naylor, author of *Culture and Change*, said, “Virtually every nation-state of the world is a multicultural one made up of groups.” With this in mind, it’s crucial to consider all aspects of an individual when striving to provide each person with exemplary customer service. One’s education, generation, social experiences, and professional environments—one’s culture—all influence the way an individual interprets information and communicates with others. In order to satisfy our clients and customers, to win their trust and satisfaction, we need to widen our focus beyond complying with their policies. We also need to provide each client with his or her own personal definition of exemplary customer service.

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