

PLEASE
★ ★ ★ **EVERY** ★ ★ ★
CUSTOMER

*Delivering Stellar
Customer Service
Across Cultures*

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CHAPTER 4

Improving Interpersonal Communication Skills

No matter what language people speak, the key to effective communication is to approach each message with a desire to understand and share information appropriately with your customers.

KEY CONCEPTS

After reading this chapter and when applying concepts learned, you will be able to:

1. Explain how differences in native language might impact quality positive global customer service.
2. Describe how people from different parts of the world should be addressed from a service standpoint.
3. Define communication and identify what you need to know to effectively interact with your customers.
4. Discuss what might lead to service breakdowns and what you can do to avoid them.
5. Determine strategies for serving different types of customers.

6. Recognize how generalizations and perceptions affect quality service.
7. Apply guidelines for overcoming stereotypes.

As a service provider, you must like people, because you will come into contact with all sizes, shapes, colors, and types every day. If you prepare properly and gain knowledge about various common characteristics related to different groups, you will be able to effectively recognize what is important to the individuals within those groups.

To prepare yourself for success, get to know as much as you can about psychology and sociology, because you will be using skills in those areas when dealing with a diverse customer population. Also, master the wide array of service technologies that you can use to provide more powerful service to your clients. These include old standards like the telephone and fax machine, as well as newer methods such as Twitter, e-mail, and text messaging. By accomplishing these things, you will be on your way to achieving career success while building strong customer-provider relationships.

SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF THE WORLD

According to the book *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*,¹ there are 6,909 languages spoken throughout the world. The top 10 languages (in order) spoken by over half the world's population are Chinese (Mandarin), Spanish, English, Hindi, Arabic, Bengali, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, and German.² With this degree of linguistic diversity it is no wonder that people have trouble communicating. Couple the language diversity with the transient nature of people as they regularly travel and relocate, the practice of offshoring (transferring jobs to other countries), and the spread of Internet use, and you are likely to encounter on any given day a customer who does not speak your primary language. It is likely that you will have a breakdown in the exchange of information and potentially in the customer-provider relationship at some point as a service provider.

The issue of communication breakdowns is further complicated by the fact that even when two people speak the same language (e.g., English), they often use different words for the same items. Even within the same country (e.g., the United States), there is often regional terminology that can be confusing.

DIFFERENCES IN WORD AND PHRASE USAGE BETWEEN ENGLISH SPEAKERS

United Kingdom	United States
Biscuit	Cracker or cookie
Car boot	Car trunk
Chips	French fries
Cooker	Stove
Hire purchase	Layaway or installment
Jersey	Sweater
Loo	Toilet
Pants	Underwear
Parcel	Package
Pumps	Tennis shoes
Queue	Line
Ring you up	Telephone
Rubber	Eraser
Silencer	Car muffler
Telly	Television
Toilet	Restroom
Twigs	Pretzels

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN WORDS AND PHRASES IN THE UNITED STATES

North/Midland/West	South
Bedroom slippers	House shoes
Dinner	Supper
Momentarily	Directly
Faucet	Spigot
Frappe	Milkshake
Lightning bug	Firefly
Man's wallet	Billfold
Pail	Bucket
Pit	Seed
Shopping cart	Buggy
To get ready	Fix or fixing to
You (plural)	Y'all



FOCUS ON POSITIVE GLOBAL SERVICE: DIFFERENT MEANINGS

To help raise your awareness of how people might speak a common language but use different terminology to describe similar things or activities, think about words or phrases that you have heard from your own experiences that differ from those used to describe the same thing in the country or area where you now reside or work. List them here:

What problems have language differences such as these caused?

DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS

The phrase “different strokes for different folks” was popularized in the song “Everyday People” by the musical group Sly and the Family Stone in 1968. That sentiment sums up how service providers should approach the diverse customer base of today. One of your biggest challenges in working with a diverse customer base is that no two people are alike, nor do they have the same expectations, needs, or wants, nor do they have the same knowledge, skills, or abilities related to communication. You will likely encounter people who have language deficits and physical or mental disabilities or other characteristics that can inhibit communication and understanding. In other cases, they may be unable to communicate effectively or may simply be too impatient to listen effectively during a service interaction. In all these instances, your goal should be to remain professional and know how to address the needs and wants of your customers. In

many cases, you may have to guide the communication exchange in order to get the information that you need to service your customers.

A key point to remember when interacting with people who are different from you is that their communication styles and preferences may differ from yours. For example, many people from North America tend to be more direct and informal than people in other regions. They often make direct eye contact and may assume more businesslike postures. Many Hispanic and Middle Easterners use intense eye contact or appear to stare as they speak. In parts of the Middle East, the phrase “The eyes are the windows to the soul” is taken to heart. This glaring eye contact makes many people outside Middle Eastern cultures uncomfortable. On the other hand, people from an Eastern culture may be put off by direct eye contact or language that they might view as a sign of arrogance or disrespect in their country. They could also be offended by what they perceive is a forceful approach, since people in some countries (e.g., Japan, Korea, or Thailand) use a more indirect or vague communication style. For example, rather than simply telling you no when something cannot be done, someone from an Asian culture might agree to do what you request with no intention of following through. In Japan, there are over a dozen ways to say no without ever using the word. Customers from such cultures might create a response to your request for something in an ambiguous manner such as “That might be difficult.” Phrasing it this way, they have avoided embarrassing you by denying or rejecting your request outright. Their intent is to save you *face*, or esteem, in the eyes of others who might overhear the conversation. Face is an important value in such countries. As a service provider, you should be conscious of this approach to communication when working with customers from these cultures.

Greetings also differ from one culture to another. For example, men from Western and European cultures often smile and extend their right hands to shake when meeting someone. In other cultures a bow might be more appropriate (e.g., Korea or Japan). A Middle Eastern customer might give a slight nod or bow, shake hands, and exchange kisses on both cheeks. A traditional Muslim man will often shake hands and then touch the palm of the right hand to his heart as a show of friendship. Women in many non-Westernized cultures hug or kiss other women on the cheek and

are uncomfortable or forbidden to touch a male who is not their husband (e.g., Middle Eastern or Japanese). If you are a woman, do not be surprised if a Middle Eastern man avoids shaking your hand during a business transaction; if you are a man, do not expect that same male customer to introduce the women who accompany him. The appropriate way to deal with greeting your customers is to smile, greet them verbally, and pause to see what they do; then follow their lead.



POSITIVE GLOBAL SERVICE ACTION TIP

Choose one language that you do not speak and take classes in it in order to better serve your diverse customer base. Many organizations actively recruit and pay a bonus to employees who speak second languages.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Communication is a transactional process of designing, delivering, receiving, and interpreting messages that share knowledge and information through verbal and nonverbal means and via various channels (e.g., face-to-face, over the telephone, and in writing). It involves the creation of messages that allow others to extract the meaning and understanding that you intend in order to avoid confusion and encourage consensus. It also includes the interpretation of messages that you receive. Because of the diverse nature of the world, people often filter messages that they receive differently based on their own values, beliefs, education level, experiences, language capabilities, age, personalities, and a variety of other factors.

To share information effectively and efficiently with your customers, you need solid communication skills, knowledge about the manner in which people from different parts of the world communicate, and the self-confidence to interact positively with others who are not like you. Part of being successful in the service profession is to periodically self-evaluate and update your knowledge, skills, and customer service practices. Like anything else, the more often you practice your service and communication skills, the better you are likely to get at them.



POSITIVE GLOBAL SERVICE ACTION TIP

In addition to strategies like the personality-style self-assessment you completed in Chapter 2, you should seek out more knowledge about yourself. Ask people who know you well (e.g., peers, supervisor, friends, relatives, and regular customers) to provide you with regular feedback on your communication skills related to verbal, nonverbal, and listening skills. Ask them to be honest—not nice—in sharing their observations about your approach to communicating with others. Don't forget to thank them for their input, since courtesy is one of the core elements of positive global customer service.

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

Effective communication skills can lead to more positive customer-provider relationships and stronger interactions in your personal life. They can affect trust, respect, morale, productivity, job performance, self-esteem, and much more.

A failure to communicate effectively can cause conflict in a service environment. This might occur when customers interact with you or another employee and receive what they believe is inaccurate or contradictory information. For example, if one of your employees told a customer that he thought a product would be available on the fourteenth of the month, and it turned out that it wouldn't be in the store until the fifteenth, the customer would surely be upset upon arriving at your organization on the fourteenth and going home empty-handed. The customer might have misunderstood because he had poor listening skills and because he really wanted the product as soon as possible. What he likely heard was only a portion of the service representative's statement: "The latest version of our product will be released on Wednesday, the fourteenth, and be in our store the next day." Unfortunately, you now have to use your active listening skills effectively to determine the issue and then attempt to appease the customer and correct the situation.

As you will read in Chapter 9 on service recovery, there are a number of strategies to use in such instances when communication and service break down with customers. In this instance, start with a sincere apology

and tell the customer what you can do to assist him. You might apologize for the misinformation and offer to have the item delivered for free on the fifteenth. In this manner, you have shown remorse for the error caused (even if it might not have been your coworker's fault). You have also shown empathy and offered a viable solution to the problem by telling the customer what you can do, not what you cannot do. Of course, you should find out the level of your personal authority to handle such situations before they ever occur by speaking with your supervisor in advance. Ask what level of authority you have to resolve such issues when they occur in the future. This will preclude you from having to go check with a supervisor when a customer situation arises.



POSITIVE GLOBAL SERVICE ACTION TIP

Ensure that you plan and deliver your messages effectively and then make sure the customer clearly understood your intended message. This will help keep you from putting yourself, your coworkers, or the organization in a situation where there might be a customer-provider breakdown.

Strategies for Avoiding Service Breakdowns

Service breakdowns cost your organization money and should be avoided whenever possible. In addition to product and service glitches, there might be interpersonal, cultural, environmental, or other factors that can lead to misunderstandings or a failure to meet customer needs, wants, or expectations. Since you are human, there is a chance that errors or mistakes will occur. Do your best to limit them, and when they happen, take proactive steps to correct the situation immediately with as little inconvenience to your customers as possible.

The following are some strategies that you might use to avoid breakdowns in customer-provider relationships.

Plan Your Messages Effectively

You must think before you speak. If you are unsure about a product, service, policy, information, or course of action, it is best to ask a customer to wait while you verify it. In the example you read in the last section, this might

have prevented the problem from occurring and, as a result, the customer from being inconvenienced.

Use Positive Language

We have all known people who act as naysayers and challenge virtually every idea or suggestion that someone else offers. Such people can be a real detriment to positive global customer service if they act this way with internal and external customers. They might be simply trying to get all the information about an issue on the table before processing it and coming to a decision. In many cases they are not being malicious; they simply do not think before they speak or write something. Failing to look at your messages from the customer's standpoint can potentially lead to a customer-provider relationship breakdown.

Take a look at the sidebar "Turning Negative to Positive Language" to see how a negatively worded message might be communicated in a more positive manner. While the first example is efficient and polite, it may be perceived as impersonal, businesslike, or challenging or as an attempt to make the customers look like they are wrong. It also focuses on what the company needs, not what the customers need. The second example is more upbeat; it asks for the same information but works toward collaboration and a positive relationship. It also indicates that the organization is working for the customers and looking out for their interests.

TURNING NEGATIVE TO POSITIVE LANGUAGE

First, the negatively worded example:

We regret to inform you that we are unable to approve your home refinance loan because you failed to provide a copy of your tax return to substantiate your income for the past year. You also failed to complete the area for your wife's employment on your application form.

If we do not get this information by [date], we will assume you do not want to proceed with the loan application and we will terminate the process.

And now the positively worded example:

Thank you for considering ABC Financial as a source for your home mortgage refinance loan. We are excited about the possibility of working with you on this deal and look forward to getting your application moving through the approval process. Please provide a copy of your tax return for last year and the name and address of your wife's employer by [date] so that we can validate income and work toward your desired closing date. If you have questions about this, please contact . . .

Avoid "You" Language

While the word *you* by itself is not a bad or negative word, it can be perceived negatively by some people based on their personality style, especially in emotionally charged situations. It might come across as sounding like verbal "finger-pointing." This is because the word can sound accusatory and potentially put someone on the defensive. For example, assume that a customer mailed back an item purchased online without contacting your organization for a return authorization number as indicated in your Web site return policy. Once the item arrives at the warehouse, you call the customer and state "Ms. Wu, I am calling because we received the product that you returned to our warehouse. You were supposed to contact us in advance to get a return authorization number before shipping the item back to us . . ." Notice that this language sounds accusatory and like a personal attack, especially in the way it uses the word *you*, and also makes an assumption that the customer made an error even before all the information about the situation has been gathered. For all you know, she might have called, gotten a number, and simply failed to reference it with the return shipment. At any rate, this approach potentially offends the customer and basically puts you in a parent-to-child communication mode where you seem to be talking down to your customer.

Monitor Customer Communication

Stay alert to verbal and nonverbal nuances in the messages your customers send. Listen for tone of voice and watch facial and body reactions to your statements and in the messages they deliver. Effective communication

involves being able to “read” the other person during a conversation and respond appropriately to any subtle reactions from the person.

There needs to be continual verbal and nonverbal feedback from both parties during a conversation. This helps ensure that messages intended were accurately received. One simple strategy for providing feedback to your customers is to *paraphrase* what you think they said. For example, if a customer said, “I came into your store yesterday to look at shoes. The clerk brought out four or five boxes to show me, and I ended up buying two identical pairs of shoes in different colors without trying on both pairs. When I got home, I realized that one box had two different-sized shoes in it.” In response, you should start with an apology for the inconvenience and then paraphrase to ensure you understood the message. After you paraphrase, always validate that your perception of what the customer said is correct. You might say something like, “Ms. Thornton, I apologize for the error. I know that this is frustrating and an inconvenience for you. I’ll be glad to help correct the issue right away. Just to be sure that I understand the problem, you came in yesterday, bought two pairs of the same shoe style in different colors, and one pair has mismatched sizes. Is that correct?” Paraphrasing is a powerful tool for putting your customer’s message into your own words and repeating it back to the customer. It serves to show the customer that you were actively listening while also helping you ensure that you heard the message correctly. That way, you do not respond inappropriately.

Speak Clearly

The manner in which you speak can impact how others receive your message. Your speed of delivery can also affect reception. People often talk in their primary language quickly and in many cases slur or use contracted versions of words (e.g., in English by dropping the *g* ending from words to create shortened versions such as *doin’, gettin’, seein’*). This can cause challenges for people who speak another language and are trying hard to listen, translate your message mentally, and get your intended message. Even when someone speaks your primary language, such shortcuts can create language breakdowns or barriers to understanding. Keep in mind that others do not have your knowledge or skills and may not be able to

communicate at the same level at which you do. Be sure to always follow the rules of *grammar*, *punctuation*, and *syntax* (the ways in which words and sentences are structured) in order to facilitate sound communication. Make sure that you pronounce words correctly and enunciate each syllable of a word clearly.

Ask Questions

The easiest way to get information from your customer is to ask the right type of question and then listen to the response. There are many types of questions, but they generally fall into two categories—open- and closed-ended.

Open-ended questions typically begin with words or phrases such as *who*, *when*, *what*, *why*, *how*, or *to what degree*. They are designed to gather large amounts of information and to allow your customer to talk. You should use this type of question to discover customer needs, wants, and expectations and to identify information that will assist in resolving product or service breakdown. The following are some examples of open-ended questions:

- What are some of the features you are looking for in _____?
- In your opinion, why do you believe that _____ is so important?
- To what degree has _____ been helpful in the previous model that you purchased?

Closed-ended questions are generally used to validate information that you heard, verify information, or get an affirmation or agreement through a short response. Be careful not to ask only closed-ended question, because they cause you to do most of the talking and limit the amount of valuable information that the customer provides. This type of question typically starts with a verb, such as *can*, *did*, *is*, *was*, *should*, *could*, or *are*. The following are examples of closed-ended questions:

- Is this the correct item?
- Should I use the home phone number you provided as a point of contact?
- Could you please verify your home address for me?

Use Silence Effectively

Many cultures view silence from different perspectives. By understanding this basic fact, you can avoid potential service breakdowns when interacting with your customers.

Silence might result from a cultural standpoint when someone has been taught that those who are older or in a position of higher status should not be challenged in any way. For example, many cultures teach the value of respect for elders; therefore, if you are an older service provider or a salesperson dealing with younger customers, they might be reluctant to ask questions or challenge what you are saying. Similarly, the value of being humble is important in many Hispanic, North American Indian, and Asian cultures. If you tend to be more outgoing or dominant in your communication style when interacting with customers from such a culture, they may not ask questions that will help them make a buying decision or get the information they need to help resolve a concern.

Check Your Perceptions

When communicating with others, especially those who speak another primary language, you must follow the rules for effective communication (e.g., grammar, syntax, pronunciation, and enunciation) in order to be understood. Avoid jargon, slang, acronyms, and technical terms unless you define them for your customers and make sure that they understand what you are saying. If they appear puzzled based on nonverbal cues or something they say in response, repeat, clarify, or phrase what you said differently. You can also do a quick *perception check* to ensure that they received the message you intended.

Respect Personal Space Preferences

The term *proxemics*, or personal space, as coined by researcher Edward T. Hall in 1966,³ refers to the physical distance between people in various social and business settings. Each culture has established, but unspoken, acceptable distances from which people feel comfortable interacting with one another. This space varies depending on the relationship among the people engaged in a conversation. People typically stand closer to family members, friends, and those they love than they do to business associates or strangers.

If you violate someone's personal space, you can cause uneasiness and social discomfort, which can ultimately end in customer-provider breakdowns. For example, in the United States people typically shake hands and then maintain a space of about 18 inches (approximately 45.7 centimeters) to 4 feet (approximately 1.22 meters), depending on group size, as they talk in a business setting. People from Japan tend to be more formal; as a result, following a bow and handshake, customers might look down and step back slightly to open the distance between themselves and the people they are speaking to. In contrast, some people from Russia, parts of Europe, and the Middle East tend to stand closer and in more direct contact with others during service encounters than might be comfortable for those outside their cultures. Based on the cultural values of someone's native country, the norms related to interactions with others are often different.

WORDS AND PHRASES THAT CAN DAMAGE CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS

Here are some words and phrases that can lead to trouble with your customers. Some sound harsh or rude, while others do not project a positive global customer service attitude. Try to avoid or limit their use.

You don't understand.

You're not listening to me.

You'll have to or need to . . .

I never said that.

It's my opinion that . . .

I (we) can't . . .

Our policy prohibits . . .

Problem.

I don't know.

I'll try . . .

What you need to do is . . .

You must, have to, or should . . .

Are you aware that . . .?

Do you understand?

Listen to me.

You don't see my point.

You're wrong.

Hang (or hold) on a second.

What's your problem?

Policy says . . .

You are required . . .

No.

I need you to . . .

But . . .

That's not my job (responsibility).

Endearment terms—e.g., *honey*, *baby*, *sweetie*

WORDS AND PHRASES THAT CAN BUILD CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS

Here are some words and phrases that can help build stronger relationships with your customers by putting a positive spin or tone on what you are communicating to them. Language such as this goes a long way to building trust and sending a message that you care about your customers' needs, wants, and expectations.

Please.	Thank you.
You're right.	Yes.
What I can or will do is . . .	May I . . . ?
I'm sorry, or I apologize.	It was my error.
Have you considered . . . ?	How may I assist you?
However, and yet (instead of <i>but</i>) . . .	It's my (our) fault.
What do you think?	Would you mind if . . . ?
I appreciate . . .	I understand (appreciate) how you feel.

PERCEPTION CHECKING

To see if your perception of a customer's reaction to your message was correct, follow these steps:

1. Identify the *behavior observed*.
Example: Mr. Bernardes, when I said it would be 7 to 10 days before we could get your new computer delivered to your home, your facial expression changed to what appeared to be one of concern.
2. Offer one or two *interpretations*.
Example: I wasn't sure if you were indicating that the time frame doesn't work for you or if you had something else go through your mind.
3. Ask for *clarification*.
Example: Which was it?

By giving customers an opportunity to provide input or clarify, you reduce the chance of later having dissatisfied them. You also send a message that you are paying attention to them.

SPATIAL DISTANCES IN THE UNITED STATES

- **Intimate distance: 0-18 inches.** This distance is typically reserved for your family and intimate relations.
 - **Personal distance: 18 inches-4 feet.** This is often reserved for your close friends and business colleagues.
 - **Social and work distance: 4-12 feet.** Usually you would maintain this space at casual business events and during business transactions.
 - **Public distance: 12 or more feet.** You would probably maintain this space at large gatherings, activities, or presentations.
-

SERVING DIFFERENT CUSTOMERS

You can help assure service success when interacting with all customers by simply focusing on their needs, wants, and expectations and delivering the same quality of positive global customer service that you have read about up to this point. The following are some thoughts related to a number of diverse groups that may help ensure that you are serving your customers well.

Religious Customers

Some service providers have encountered service challenges as a result of their personal beliefs and lack of knowledge about people who practice different *religions* and dress or behave in a different manner because of their religious beliefs. You may have witnessed that since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, some people espouse negative views of individuals who are Muslim or are from cultures in which many women choose to wear the traditional *hijab* clothing—consisting of a scarf that covers the head and loose-fitting dress that conceals the body form—or in which men dress in traditional ankle-length garb with long sleeves, called a *thawb* in Arabic.

Because of their beliefs and the type of clothing they wear, many people from various religions and cultures often endure negative jokes, stories, events, and otherwise discriminatory actions by many people. Make sure that you do not project such negativity toward your customers

either consciously or unconsciously when you encounter them. Not only are such actions ethically and morally wrong, but they are also illegal in many instances. When serving your customers, you should remember to take a proactive approach to providing quality global service to everyone with whom you come into contact.



POSITIVE GLOBAL SERVICE ACTION TIP

Research the major religions of the world that are prevalent in your country in order to better understand and relate to your customers. When the opportunity arises to interact with people from a different religion, get to know them and discuss their beliefs and culture. The more you understand people, the better you can serve them.

Disabled Customers

According to a report by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2008, of the 291.1 million people in the population, 54.4 million (18.7 percent) had some level of *disability* and 35 million (12 percent) had a severe disability.⁴ These numbers are projected to grow as the population ages.

To address the needs of these people, laws that provide required accommodations and opportunities for people with disabilities have been passed in the United States [e.g., Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and ADA Amendments Act of 2008] and many other countries. As a service provider, you and your organization must comply with these laws.

Depending on the types of disability that customers have, you may have to adapt your service delivery style a bit in order to meet their needs. Remember not to stereotype people because they have a type of disability. Just because someone has a sight or hearing impairment does not mean that he or she has the same degree of sensory loss as another customer with those disabilities. It is best to always ask customers if you suspect they need an accommodation or assistance rather than assuming and doing the wrong thing, which might cause offense or embarrassment.

The following are some strategies for providing services based on disability type:

- **Avoid patronizing.** Even if they have special needs, people with disabilities are basically the same as your nondisabled customers. Therefore, you must treat them the same. Avoid the appearance of “talking down” to customers with disabilities. A physical or mental disability does not mean that they should be valued less as a customer or person.
- **Refer to the person, not the disability.** Instead of referring to a person based on his or her disability (e.g., the blind man or woman) when talking to someone else, refer to the person based some other characteristic (e.g., the man or woman in the blue shirt or blouse). Better yet, simply say, “The man or woman who needs or wants . . .”
- **Ask before offering assistance.** Just as you would ask someone without a disability whether you might provide assistance, hold a door, or carry a package, do the same for a person with a disability.
- **Be respectful.** The amount of respect you show to all customers should be at a consistently high level. This includes tone of voice (showing patience), gestures, eye contact, and other communication techniques.



POSITIVE GLOBAL SERVICE ACTION TIP

Search online for resources and advocacy groups in order to educate yourself about the capabilities and needs of customers with various disabilities. Also, search for legislation related to the disabled in your country so that you are aware of requirements that you and your organization must meet in serving customers.

Elderly Customers

One of the biggest mistakes some service providers make, especially younger ones, is assuming that older people need more help or have disabilities (e.g., sight or hearing impairments). Do not make such mistakes when you are serving your customers. In fact, many older customers are in excellent physical and mental shape, are still employed, and have more

time to be active now than when they were younger. Some studies show that senior citizens have more disposable income now than at any other time in history.

Often, many older customers do have preconceived ideas about what quality service looks like because of their experience, and they expect it. This is why you should strive to provide quality global customer service to them and all your other customers. Use the same sound service skills that you've been using and that you've read about thus far when interacting with these customers.

The following strategies will come in handy when interacting with older customers:

- **Maintain respect.** As you would with any other customer, be respectful. Even if the customer seems a bit arrogant, disoriented, or disrespectful, don't lose your professionalism. Recognize that sometimes these behaviors are a response to perceptions based on your cues. When this happens, quickly evaluate your behavior and make adjustments, if necessary. If an older customer seems abrupt in his or her response, think about whether you might have non-verbally signaled impatience because of your perception that he or she was slow in acting or responding.
- **Guard against biases.** Be careful not to let your perceptions about older people interfere with good service. Also, do not use age-based comments when referring to an older coworker or external customer, since these may cause people to form opinions about your level of professionalism or your beliefs regarding older people as a result. Either could cause problems in the workplace and ultimately impact service potential.
- **Answer questions.** Providing information to customers is crucial in order to help them make reasonable decisions. Even though you may have just explained something, listen to the customer's questions, respond, and restate. If it appears that the customer has misunderstood, try repeating the information, possibly using slightly different words.
- **Do not patronize.** If you appear to talk down to older customers, problems could arise and you could lose a customer or generate

complaints to your manager. Customers who are elderly should not be treated as if they are senile! A condescending attitude will often cause any customer, elderly or otherwise, to take his or her business elsewhere.

- **Don't become overly familiar.** A mistake that some service providers make is that they become too familiar with their customers. In the case of senior citizens this might mean adopting references used by their accompanying children or grandchildren (e.g., *grandpa*, *grammy*, or *mommy*). For example, if a child referred to someone as “grammy” and then you later commented that “Grammy will probably like this” when referring to a product you are discussing, you might be perceived as rude, disrespectful, or intrusive. Or imagine how you would feel if you and your spouse or significant other were shopping and you used a pet name (*sugar* or *baby*) in front of a service provider who later said something like, “What do you think of this, Sugar?” In either instance, you have crossed the line from professional service provider to someone who assumes that you can take such communication liberties. This is not a safe assumption and might damage the customer-provider relationship.

International Customers

There are many issues to consider when interacting with people from other countries. Their experiences, expectations, communication abilities, values, and many other factors could differ from yours. The following are some things to consider when serving international customers:

- **Use humor and sarcasm cautiously.** People from various cultures have different interpretations about what is humorous or not, often based on their cultural values and beliefs and what is acceptable in their countries. Comments that focus on various aspects of diversity (e.g., religion, sex, sexual preference, weight, hair color, age, or social status) can be offensive and should not be made. In general, because humor and sarcasm do not cross

cultural boundaries well, you should avoid using them with international customers. Each culture has a different interpretation of what is humorous and socially acceptable. Err on the side of conservatism and caution rather than risking offense.

- **Use nonverbal cues cautiously.** The nonverbal cues that you are familiar with may carry different meanings in other cultures. Be careful when you use symbols or gestures if you are not certain how your customer will receive them. As you will read in Chapter 5, some nonverbal cues that are common in one culture might have negative meanings in others. An example of this is beckoning by curling and uncurling your index finger. In the United States, this is a gesture intended to get someone to come to you; however, in Australia or Hong Kong, it might be used for calling animals or ladies of the evening.

THE IMPACT OF PERCEPTIONS ON COMMUNICATION

Communication with customers can break down because of conscious or unconscious views that you have about others. People often make *generalizations* about others as a result of *perceptions* they might have. In some instances, these generalizations are made out of careless disregard even though the person might know better, while in others they are based on ignorance or lack of knowledge about other groups. A good example of how some service providers might generalize can be seen when they lump together all customers who speak Spanish (e.g., Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Spaniards). While such people have a commonality in their base language, they are not the same culturally and do not share the same historical experiences. In fact, since most people take pride in their home countries, a customer will likely become offended if you assume that there is no difference between the groups based on their common language or make comments that show you know nothing about their cultures.

Such lapses can create a feeling that you are not knowledgeable about the world or do not care to learn about your customers. In either case you will do little to build rapport with them.

One form of such perceptions is a *stereotype*. Stereotypes are widely held beliefs that you might have of other people or groups. Stereotypes typically arise from partial truths, misinformation, and assumptions based on something that you have read, heard, or otherwise experienced in your life. There are positive stereotypes (e.g., Italians are great lovers) and negative ones (e.g., women are inferior to men at math).

When these stereotypes are negative, they can project an attitude of prejudice. Often these notions are a result of *ethnocentrism*. This is the belief that you or your own cultural group is superior to someone else or another cultural group. Negative stereotypes generally result from some life experience that taught us that certain individuals or groups have less value than we do. Unfortunately, unless you grew up in a bubble, you have experienced such teachings. Most people know on a rational level, though, that acting on negative stereotypes is inappropriate and hurtful.

Another potential obstacle to positive global customer service might be your perception about gender roles in your native culture. Because many cultures have clearly defined roles that men and women can or should assume in society, it is often difficult for some service providers to separate personal beliefs from quality service standards when interacting with a customer of a different gender. No matter what your personal beliefs might be related to gender, you must not let them interfere in the delivery of quality service in such instances.



FOCUS ON POSITIVE GLOBAL SERVICE: SUBCONSCIOUS GENDER STEREOTYPES

Many people have been conditioned since they were young children about what are considered acceptable gender roles for males and females in their culture. Often these beliefs create challenges when serving customers.

To identify potential predispositions that you may have related to gender roles that are assigned to men and women in your society, give your first impression for each term on the following page. Do not think about the word; just react by placing an *F* by words that you feel best describe females, an *M* by those that describe males, and a *B* by those that could describe both females and males. Don't change an answer later.

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Truck driver | <input type="checkbox"/> Soccer/football player | <input type="checkbox"/> Skydiver |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Airline pilot | <input type="checkbox"/> Pastry baker | <input type="checkbox"/> Chef |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Baseball fan | <input type="checkbox"/> Dog groomer | <input type="checkbox"/> Bus driver |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Entrepreneur | <input type="checkbox"/> Service professional | <input type="checkbox"/> Nurse |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Romantic | <input type="checkbox"/> Courageous | <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spontaneous | <input type="checkbox"/> Impatient | <input type="checkbox"/> Goal-oriented |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sensitive | <input type="checkbox"/> Funny | <input type="checkbox"/> Powerful |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Strong | <input type="checkbox"/> Competitive | <input type="checkbox"/> Loving |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Outspoken | <input type="checkbox"/> Assertive | <input type="checkbox"/> Talkative |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nurturing | <input type="checkbox"/> Intelligent | <input type="checkbox"/> Driven |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Intuitive | <input type="checkbox"/> Sexy | <input type="checkbox"/> Critical |

Once you have finished, go back and to see how many of each letter you recorded. Most people typically have a mix of all three. If you look closely and think of all the people you have known or heard or read about in your lifetime, you probably know some who fall into both categories. Therefore, if there is even one incident where an adjective could describe the gender opposite from the one that you've indicated, you may have some hidden stereotypes related to men or women and the gender roles they can and should fill. This does not mean that you are prejudiced. It simply means that you may want to work on expanding your knowledge about others and on trying to develop a more open-minded perspective so that you do not inadvertently do or say anything that might endanger the customer-provider relationship.



POSITIVE GLOBAL SERVICE ACTION TIP

Make copies of the "Focus on Positive Global Service: Subconscious Gender Stereotypes" activity and give them out to a group of your friends or peers. After all of you have completed the exercise, get together to discuss your answers and develop strategies for prevention of stereotypes in the future.

OVERCOMING STEREOTYPES

When you hold a stereotype about someone, you apply one negative example to all people in the group to which a representative person belongs. Once one example surfaces that seems to substantiate a stereotype, it may

only reinforce your negative perception. As a result, the level of service that you provide might not be appropriate. You should never treat people differently based on stereotypes or even talk about any group of people in general terms. As a service provider, doing so can create a problem, because others may form an opinion about you or your organization as a result of what they hear you say. You must guard against verbalizing generalizations in the workplace; otherwise, a customer may think, “Well if he [or she] says that about _____, I wonder what is being said about me or my group when I am not around?”

Negative perceptions can cost in terms of lost customers and revenue. Remember that you have internal as well as external customers. If you use derogatory terms toward others, share offensive jokes that project stereotypes, or use noninclusive or discriminatory language, you are setting yourself up for failure. There is no room in today’s workplace for what some consider as humor or prejudiced beliefs and actions. Most organizations have a zero-tolerance policy against such activities, and you could lose your job and have trouble finding a suitable alternative if you do not adhere to acceptable standards of behavior.

As a service provider, it is your job to maintain a positive service attitude toward all customers and to deliver the best-possible service that you can provide in any customer-provider encounter. No matter what your personal beliefs or feelings are about a particular person or group, you have a responsibility as an organizational representative to focus on customers in a manner that sends a positive message about your employer. Remember that you represent the organization when dealing with customers and potential customers.

There is no place in today’s business environment for stereotyping. Your goal as a service provider should be to treat everyone with whom you come into contact equally and address their individual needs, wants, and expectations.

The following are some guidelines for avoiding stereotypes in a service environment:

- **Educate yourself.** Gather knowledge about various groups, religions, countries, disabilities, and other diverse elements that

make up today's world. This is the major way in which you can help eliminate personal prejudices and can also help deter others from exhibiting them in the workplace.

- **Speak up about biases.** If you hear someone making a biased comment toward a specific group or individual, say something. Correct misperceptions, or simply point out that the comment is a negative stereotype that makes you uncomfortable and ask the person not to behave or talk that way around you. Silence conveys acceptance, and the last thing you need in the workplace is to have others believe that you are prejudiced or biased.
- **Interact with people on a personal level.** Take the time to get to know a little about your customers and coworkers, if possible. The more you learn about an individual or a group, the more likely you are to provide successful positive global customer service.
- **Build a diverse personal and professional network.** Think about the people who are in your current personal network of friends and family. Many times, without consciously trying, we associate with people who “look like us” or have similar interests and beliefs. If this is the case for you, consciously seek out people from diverse cultural, ethnic, racial, age, religious, socioeconomic, and other groups and get to know more about them and their values and beliefs. What you learn will help you enhance your ability to provide service to customers.
- **Experience other cultures.** If you get the opportunity to travel to other countries, take it. By visiting other cultures and interacting with people outside your own culture, you learn acceptance and start to realize why certain people might think or behave as they do. Two simple ways to experience other people and cultures on a local level is to befriend people from other cultures wherever possible and to seek out restaurants that serve the cuisine of other countries and eat there periodically. Typically, these establishments will be staffed by people from those countries. You can strike up conversations with management and servers and learn small facts about their home country.

- **Serve all customers equitably.** Even if you have strong feelings about an individual or a group, make sure that you do not let them influence your professionalism or level of service. If you feel that you cannot assist a customer because of your beliefs, politely excuse yourself and go get a coworker or supervisor to do so. If that is not an option, hide your feelings and strive to provide positive global service. Other customers may witness your efforts. Their reaction and degree of satisfaction with you and your organization will often be determined by the manner in which you handle the situation.



FOCUS ON POSITIVE GLOBAL SERVICE: AVOIDING STEREOTYPES

Think of instances in which you have heard people make derogatory comments, talk, or tell jokes about a certain group based on characteristics or factors related to the people in that group—for example, having to do with religion, body shape, physical or mental abilities, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity.

Did you participate in the conversation? Why or why not?

What are some of the stereotypes against others that you have heard about or witnessed?

What can you personally do to avoid or prevent stereotypes in the workplace?

Use your answers to the questions in this activity to create a personal action plan that will help you avoid generalizing or stereotyping others.



POSITIVE GLOBAL SERVICE ACTION TIP

Be ready to deal with a variety of diverse situations related to cultural beliefs by reading books, articles, and other information about various countries, cultures, values, and belief systems. To get started, visit Amazon or Barnes and Noble online and type in phrases such as “intercultural communication,” “diverse communication,” and “interpersonal relationships.” Examine the tables of contents for the books that come up on the screen and then research additional terms you find there. This will provide you with a strong base of knowledge for understanding and dealing with people from around the world.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, you reviewed ways to improve communication and relationships with your customers. Some of the key concepts that you read about include:

- It’s almost a certainty that on any given day you will interact with a customer who speaks another native language.
- People from other parts of the world, or who are different from you, will have a communications style and preferences that differ from yours.
- Effective communication skills can lead to more positive customer-provider relationships and stronger interactions in your personal life.

- Service breakdowns cost your organization money and should be avoided whenever possible. Take proactive steps to correct any situation immediately.
- You can help ensure service success when interacting with all customers by simply focusing on their needs, wants, and expectations and delivering the same quality of positive global customer service.
- Generalizations are often made about others as a result of perceptions that you might have.
- Stereotypes are typically based on partial truths, misinformation, and assumptions about another group. There is no place in today's business environment for stereotyping.
- No matter what your personal beliefs or feelings are about a particular person or group, you have a responsibility as an organizational representative to focus on customers in a manner that sends a positive message about your employer.