

Providing Outstanding Service across Cultures

Good customer service meets the needs of our customers in ways that have value and meaning. Multicultural Service (MCS) goes one step further in recognizing that our customer's needs and expectations may vary across cultures. Providing the same quality service to all customers frequently means adapting our personal delivery style and usual business practices to meet individual needs. The key is in understanding the role of culture.

Culture is the total way of life in a group of people. It is transmitted from generation to generation and is largely unconscious and complex. When we think of culture, images of language, food, dress, music and holiday celebrations come to mind. But culture's effect on behavior is much larger and more subtle. For example: how rapidly we speak, how formally or informally we treat each other, how important it is to establish relationships in business and how we do so, what is humorous, and how we get things done—are all influenced by culture.

Other differences we must consider when serving multicultural customers include differences in customer expectations such as: individual and family values, courtesy, communication styles (verbal and nonverbal), and logistical needs (currency, transportation, etc.).

We are all **culturally programmed**. We respond, react and interact with each other based upon our individual culture. We interpret and translate our cultural programming in ways that are personal. In doing so, we can fall into numerous cultural traps when serving customers whose cultural programming is different from our own. We trap ourselves with our emotions, habits, judgments, and our own ethnocentrism.

We, as service providers, can avoid falling into these cultural traps by being **self-aware**—reflecting upon our own behaviors, how they might impact others, and how we might adapt or change them in the future. By being **flexible and open**, we can adapt our service delivery style to the changing customer

base and the requirements of a situation. By practicing **objectivity**—observing ourselves and others—we can take note of behaviors without making judgments or criticisms.

As service providers we need specialized training to increase our awareness, learn skills, and practice behaviors that will make us Cultural Translators— service providers who recognize and resolve situations where cultural differences can be barriers to effective service

An organization, such as ours, desiring to develop Cultural Translators should know and follow the three **As**:

Assess the organization's reality. Review the organization's need to provide outstanding service across cultures.

Acknowledge the need and desire to provide consistently high levels of customer service to ALL customers. This requires an understanding of our organization's reality and an understanding of the impact of culture on the customer service interaction.

Acquire new tools, skills and techniques to adapt to the needs of a changing marketplace. Apply skills and strategies to adapt delivery styles, expand the range of possible service responses, and recognize and resolve situations where cultural differences can be barriers to effective service.

When Service Providers are equipped with the understanding of cultural programming, and can apply the specific tools and techniques of cultural translators, they are in a better position to increase

profitability by positioning their organization to attract and retain a larger portion of global and diverse customer markets and by improving current service to their existing customers.