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Cross-cultural Sensitivities in Hospitality: a matter of conflict or understanding

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Abstract

Growth in the service industry internationally has imposed dealings between people from different cultures. As culture relates to norms, values and customs of people it generates behavioural differentiation. This results in difference in expectations during service encounters as customers, employees or suppliers. Hotels and other sectors of hospitality industry are faced with challenges of cross-cultural service encounters and continuously need to assess their service performance against the expectation of their customers, employees and suppliers from a diverse background. Such encounters might become easier to deal with if individuals are brought up in a home environment which encourages learning about others and providing service to others. This paper presentation highlights the selected research on cross cultural sensitivities and discusses its managerial implications in hospitality industry from service encounters perspective. The presentation concludes stating some current issues and suggesting a way forward.
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Introduction
Are multiculturalism; multinational; globalization bad words? Or are they rich words? Is world really fast becoming a global village? Are we loosing our cultural values or enriching them? Perhaps answers may vary based on our individual experiences. Culture can be the source of cooperation, cohesion, and progress, instead of conflict, disintegration and failure (Harris 2004). What is important for society is to learn and use diversity to the advantage of all human beings, specifically in hospitality industry where diversity has been growing for several decades and is the contemporary trend.

The fact that most developed economies are fast becoming a service economy is well established now. Consider the example of USA it is noted that 77 percent of its gross national product (GNP) and 80 percent of its workforce comes from the service sector (Sizoo et. al 2005). Similar is the case in other industrialized nations of Western Europe, Canada and Japan (Malhotra et al 2005). In the process of globalization it becomes important from a commercial as well social perspective to understand - how should we deal with people from diverse background? If we aim to develop a society of knowledge–based skills, which values learning and looks forward to be of service to others, we need to be aware of cultural sensitivities and avoid embarrassing situations which can cause both commercial and social harm. For the purpose of this presentation commercial interest within hospitality service context will be considered.

The presentation aims to highlight the significance of sensitivity in cross-cultural encounters and how to maximise benefits from such encounters.

In recent years services such as education; hotels; fast food; banks and investment agencies, etc. have become more and more of a global business. International trade in service since mid 1980s has shown a growth rate of 175 percent and today makes one-fifth of all world trade (Stauss and Mang 1999). Such a notable growth also requires that service companies have to conduct their business with operators and customers of different cultures.
Working with people from our own culture sometime becomes a challenge let alone working and dealing with people from different cultures.

In service management literature, the term ‘service encounter’ is widely established and indicates the contact between customer and service provider (Stauss and Mang 1999). Service encounters in hotels are opportunities to up-sell hotel services, create positive impression on customers and enhance the image of the property. In addition, physical environment has a significant role too in creating an impression but it can be easily shattered by an indifferent attitude by service staff during service encounters. Though, as stated earlier in service management literature, service encounter is widely established, there is no consensus on the definition of service quality. Stauss and Mang (1999) in discussing service quality, state two mutually dependant variables presenting perspective of two interactions in service encounters, which may become a cause of two main problem areas:

- Problems appear because the performance of the domestic service provider does not meet the expectations of the foreign customer (inter-cultural provider performance gap).
- It is possible that the service cannot be fulfilled at usual performance level because the foreign customers do not maintain the role behaviour expected by the domestic supplier (inter-cultural customer performance gap).

If we consider culture as a set of norms, rules and customs, as a result people from different cultures have differences in their norms and customs. This leads to different expectation from different cultures. If service managers are unaware of core cultural expectations of customers it will result in a gap in performance of service. One could consider two options – because customers are different to us we cannot satisfy them, just ignore it. The other option could be learn about their core cultural values and see what best can be done for them. It is also observed customers in a foreign land or in different cultural settings are prepared to settle for less which eases the process of pleasing them with little efforts. Several nations and industries are making use of this and as global competition increases, understanding the cultural impacts of services become critical for service providers. Though little research has been done on the impact of culture on services in hotels but as the significance becomes more apparent, research is also growing in the area. However,
lessons could be learned from other service industries for example international travelers expected to be least satisfied with airline in-flight service are likely to be Japanese, as indicated by customer surveys (Zeithaml and Bitner 1996).

How do we quickly assess core values of a culture? Harris (2004) suggests the following classification:

1. Sense of self and space – what validates one’s sense of self within a particular group? What constitutes adequate space between individuals such as distance or closeness?
2. Communication and language – consider verbal and non-verbal exchange, body language and gestures etc.
3. Dress and appearance – typical or distinctive outward garments, dress requirements for various events eg business or religious etc.
4. Food and feeding habits – selection, presentation, diet or religious needs, use of cutlery or chopsticks or hands.
5. Time and time consciousness – sense of time exact or relative, precise or casual.
6. Relationship – how are individual or organizational relationships determined (eg age, gender, status, wealth, power)? Family arrangements, use of titles etc.
7. Values and norms – customs, and practices.
8. Beliefs and attitudes – spirituality, faith etc.
9. Mental process and learning – thinking and learning style, organizing and processing of information.
10. Work habits and practices – attitude to work and labour, dominant type of work, rewards and promotions etc.

(source – Harris 2004).

Let us consider an example of two cultural differences here.

**Asian versus Western Culture**

In studying the influence of culture on consumer perceptions of service encounters Matilla (1999) points out with relation to hotel industry that because first-class hotel services are delivered by people, cultural factors are likely to mediate the hotel customers’ attitude toward
the service component of their hotel experience. As service styles in Asia are more people oriented compared to the West, where efficiency of service delivery is highly valued, Asian consumers even for low cost services expect a relatively high level of service (cited in Matilla 1999). A Western consumer will not mind an impersonal service if it is efficient and time-saving where-as an Asian consumer places primary emphasis on the quality of interpersonal relationships and the quality of interaction between employee and customer (Matilla 1999). In reporting the service experiences of culturally diverse consumers in multicultural society of Australia, Barker and Hartel (2004) state that on the basis of service provider behaviour (both verbal and non-verbal), culturally diverse customers perceive they are the recipients of inequitable service and consequently experience low levels of satisfaction.

The cultural background strongly influences consumer behaviour. Reisinger and Turner (1999) suggest that at consumption stage of buyer behaviour Japanese tourists have experienced problems with Australian service provisions. The Japanese complained about a lack of professional service in restaurants, poor organization of tours, lack of sophisticated packaging, lack of good manners by service staff and slow service. All this lead to that Gold Coast region, the major holiday destination for Japanese tourists, starting loosing it appeal as a preferred tourist destination for Japanese honeymooners in favour of Hawaii (Reisinger and Turner 1999).

This explains and supports the importance of cultural sensitivity and cross cultural service encounters.

**Cross cultural sensitivity and employee performance and business success**

Any international service trade whether hotels or other services usually will involve service encounters and dealings with consumers from different cultures. Ignorance of core cultural sensitive values often leads to erroneous belief resulting in unhappy customers and lost business. It becomes painful when it doesn't need to be. Sizoo (et al 2005) point out the fact that intercultural sensitivity which is an attitude that enables an individual to interact effectively with people from different cultures is a skill that can be measured and learned. Research indicates that cross culturally sensitive employees provide their foreign customers better service. They are able to adjust their serving styles to meet the needs of their foreign
customers. Such an act is extremely beneficial for any hotel as such employees are able to
generate more revenue for the hotel through their impression on hotel guests and suggestive
selling. Many American firms fail to take advantage of cross-cultural training even if it is
made available (Lee-Ross 2005). Likewise hospitality industry is failing to account
appropriately for cross-cultural understanding in management training programmes and
subsequent initiatives. Ritz-Carlton hotel group experienced difficulties when they tried to
introduce a western-style total quality management system in their Hong Kong hotel due to
Chinese cultural value ‘Guanxi’ ( see Lee-Ross 2005).

Business success in the 21st century will be dependent on how individuals and organizations
acquire and practice cross-cultural sensitivity and skills in dealing with customers from
diverse background (Harris 2004). Harris (2004) also suggests that if European Union has to
continue to succeed, leaders in all 25 member countries have to devote more attention to
culture and business. The growing international trade and dependence on service sector are
contributing factors for practitioners in hospitality to acquire proficiency in coping with
diversity. Research indicates cultural training is essential to appreciate cultural sensitivity. A
world class hotel or any hospitality organization may assess its own status of cultural
sensitivity by asking the following questions:

- Does the way of doing business in your hotel suffer severely from cultural lag?
- Do the hotel managers seek to understand the culture of customers, employees and
  suppliers?
- Do the hotel managers utilize cultural analysis and insights in terms of their own
  management style and public relations?
- Do the hotel managers realize the value of cultural differences and promote cultural
  synergy?

(adapted from Harris 2004).

As the market place becomes increasingly multicultural the production and distribution of
services in tourism and hospitality involve increase of cross-cultural experiences. A cross-
cultural service encounter may be impacted by the lack of support system and networks
which mediate service environments with the own culture of the tourists. When tourists’
expectations are not met this often leads to disappointments, fear, loneliness which can
result in cultural conflicts (Weiermair 2000). Within any culture there could be a multitude of possible subcultures which also influence or control individual’s behaviour. While inseparability is a characteristic of all services which involves co-production, where customer is a part of the service production process, cross-cultural encounters pose greater challenge being impacted by different cultures.

Service failures in any situation need to be followed with a ‘service recovery’ attempt and this attempt often contributes to customers’ final level of satisfaction. If there is no attempt of recovery from a service failure the consumer locks in the experience and evaluate the service as low (Warden et al 2003). Research suggests a good service recovery strategy often provides an opportunity to obtain better ratings from the customer than if the failure had never happened (Warden et al 2003). Cross-cultural service failures often become easier to recover as customers consider it to have happened due to cultural difference or confusion. In other words open to cross-cultural sensitivity provides a benefit of doubt in recovery from service failures. Such opportunity must not be ignored rather built upon for better understanding.

Given different possibilities with cross-cultural sensitivity and intercultural service encounters and growing globalization what are the implications for management of the modern world hotels and other hospitality sector.

**Managerial implication and conclusion**

As the service industry grows globally; as the managers are exposed to more and more cross-cultural dealing; as the work force becomes more and more diverse; as the expectations of consumers based on their core cultural values increase; as the competition in hotels and other sectors of the hospitality industry increases; as the travelers and other customers become more knowledgeable about the environment around them; it all generates challenges for the managers in the new millennium. Such challenges need to be recognized and acted upon for the success of business specifically and society generally.

What are the current issues and how do the managers address them? It includes:
• Open to cross-cultural sensitivity – bringing up at home has an influence on future behaviour of individuals. Consequently, awareness and preparedness to deal with diverse groups of people developed at home environment has a positive bearing in future. It facilitates efficiency and effectiveness with inter-cultural service encounters for prospective managers staff in hospitality industry.
• Can service be a force of world peace? – Developing such an attitude at home will impact the world peace process – one can become a bigot at home or a compassionate and considerate citizen.
• Understand the differences between developed and developing countries in terms of service quality perceptions and evaluations (Malhotra et al 2005).
• Know the core cultural values of your customers, employees and suppliers to customize your services where possible. The flexibility of service providers’ behaviour can be easily adjusted as compared to physical environment facilities.
• Correct handling of complaints is a necessity. An adequate reaction to complaints from customers of other cultures requires high social and inter-cultural competence which should be promoted by appropriate training (Stauss and Mang 1999).
• Service recovery from failures is extremely important and sensitive recovery attempt in cross-cultural service encounter becomes easier as benefit of doubt due to cultural difference is fast recognized by the customers. Hence, a recovery attempt must always be made.

It can indeed be concluded that culture influences our behaviour in all dealings. As hotel operators/managers we cannot achieve our corporate goals in international business without being open and sensitive to the cultures of our guests, employees and suppliers. Let us initiate at home by talking, sharing knowledge about the diversity in the world, its richness and contribution to the human race, let us consider a step to enrich ourselves and people around us. Let us create ‘excellence at home’ challenge our knowledge competence to enable us to produce leaders rather just followers. Let us make an effort that:

Everything we do should be of service to others.
References


