



Driving Sales and Satisfaction with Multilingual Service

by
Michael Soon Lee, MBA

If you want to increase sales, you have to go where the customers are — which increasingly means in multi-cultural market segments at home and in different countries abroad. In the U.S., minorities are the fastest-growing consumer group and already hold more than \$2.5 trillion in total buying power. This is more than the Gross Domestic Product of all but the five largest economies in the world! As the global economy continues to coalesce into a single, interconnected market, it becomes easier to sell goods and services to the billions of consumers in rapidly growing economies throughout the world.

Gaining a foothold in these markets, growing your business and building a sustainable competitive advantage are all based on a foundation of customer service and support. Many companies provide good service, but few achieve exceptional levels of service with an absolute commitment to serving customers in the language most comfortable for them.

While providing multilingual service and support may be a relatively new concept to some organizations, it is already a common practice in many industries. Most government agencies or hospitals usually have staff on hand who can speak most major languages, and interpretation phone lines are often available for others. For businesses that naturally attract large numbers of foreign customers, such as immigration law firms, their staff is usually trained in basic conversational skills in their customers' native languages.

Exceptional service experiences start with putting the customer's needs first as soon as the sales process begins (because without the sale, you have no customers). In instances where a prospective customer does not speak English as his or her first language, a sales representative who knows a few words in the customer's language has a significant advantage over colleagues who do not. Simply making an effort to bridge the language barrier is always much appreciated. It is a little-known fact that the 1,000 most commonly used words in English account for 85% of conversations. The same is true for most other languages as well.

Conversely, forcing a non-native English-speaking patron to communicate in your language is just plain bad service and could cost you a sale. Many salespeople, service personnel and customer care staff can be abrupt and impatient with non-native English speakers because it may take them longer to get their point across. Learning a new language can make your employees more sensitive to the challenges of speaking a different language. As they struggle to say a few words correctly in a different language, your employees will begin to understand how difficult it can be for some customers to speak English. If you have just started learning a new language, take every opportunity to engage customers who speak that language in conversation. In addition to improving your ability to communicate, you will find this effort instantly takes your relationships with customers to a much deeper level.

Long-term success and profitability depends on building and maintaining a satisfied and loyal base of customers who continue to purchase your company's products and services. This means not just being exceptional during the sales process but also after the sale has been made—when customers may assume their value and importance to the company has diminished. This is when multilingual customer service can become a powerful competitive differentiator.

When problems occur, it always helps to communicate with customers in the language that is most comfortable for them. If they are already angry and upset, removing the stress and anxiety of speaking another language can help reduce their frustration. Even if you only have a basic command of the customer's native language, it may take longer to get your point across but the customer is much more likely to be receptive and understanding. You might even get them to laugh as you mispronounce a word or two, which can be a real turning point in any tense customer service situation.

If you really want to get the most out of your language skills, learn how to say "I know how you feel. I felt the same way when this happened to me. Let me tell you what I have found to be some possible solutions." Practice this over and over again because it tells customers you empathize with their situation and because it is in their language, they should hear it loud and clear.

Avoid saying you "sympathize" with their situation because, in any language, this means you just feel badly for them. Your sympathy does not get them closer to resolving their problem in a satisfactory manner.

No matter what language you choose to respond to a complaint in, be sure to keep your tone of voice calm and relaxed. People from some cultures can get very emphatic when trying to make a point and if you respond the same way, it usually only makes the situation worse.

Another important facet of multilingual customer service is body language. Researchers have found that less than 35% of communication is transmitted through words while 65% is carried by body language. For instance, if you say you are doing everything possible to resolve a problem but have your arms folded across your chest, it signals that you are not willing to try. Body language is especially important to people from high-context cultures in places like Latin America and Asia where words carry even less meaning than in the west. Regardless of what language you are speaking, make sure your body language reinforces what you are saying.

Above all, do not hesitate to apologize to customers for any inconvenience or frustration they may have experienced. This is an important first step in repairing the relationship in many cultures. People just want to know that someone understands their situation and is taking responsibility for fixing the problem. Learning to make a simple apology in the most common languages of your customers is a very valuable investment.

Finally, be sure all agreements to resolve customer service issues are made in writing. This helps to ensure nothing was lost in translation. Even when people speak the same language, misunderstandings frequently occur and language differences only compound the problem. Put promises to customers on paper; words and numbers are much easier to understand when they are written.

Remember, just saying a few words in the customer's language will make him or her much more understanding and build stronger relationships. Great customer service is great customer service in any language. However, making an attempt to speak the customer's language can quickly elevate you above your competition.

About the Author

Michael Soon Lee, MBA, is a diversity consultant and trainer who has written seven books on the subject including, "Cross-Cultural Selling for Dummies®". He is President of EthnoConnect™ which helps organizations increase sales to multicultural customers and its clients include: Coca-Cola, Chevron, Boeing, the University of Wisconsin, the National Association of Realtors, MillerCoors, Virginia Tech University, Cedars Sinai Hospital and over a thousand others.

Michael can be reached at: (800) 417-7325 or www.EthnoConnect.com.

