

What Do You Say?

When Diversity Creates a Challenge

We are all different. We come from different backgrounds and practice different cultural customs. It makes life interesting. But sometimes our diversity can create challenges in our workplace. Without even being aware of it, we may tend to view other people's style and behavior as wrong or threatening, simply because we don't understand it and it's different.

So the first thing to think about when considering this issue is, "What's my attitude?" It's easy to let the fear of something different create distrust. And every one of your guests will pick up on your attitude before you say a word. So part of being a service pro (and an all-around more tolerant, approachable person) is deciding that you are going to let different be just that ... different. Not wrong. Not right. No judgment attached—***just different.*** And since your goal for each and every one of your unique customers is the same—treating each of them like a guest and taking care of their needs the very best way you can—all of your guests are going to appreciate the same great service.

But even for pros with the greatest of attitudes, challenging situations do happen. What about those? Here are some words and thoughts to help handle common diversity issues that might show up in your workday.

What if your guest smells funny?

Hey, don't laugh. At one time or another, we've probably all knocked some poor, unsuspecting person over with our second-day garlic breath. So what do you do? Well, let's see: just reach under your desk, grab your handy gas mask, subtly place it over your face and continue with a pleasant, "How can I help you today—care for a breath mint?" OK ... really. How do you deal with it? You just do. You

ignore it. You smile. You make sure your words are polite and pleasant. And you give your guest great service.

What if you can't understand your guest's English?

If you have a hard time understanding one of your guests, just be honest. This person wants to be understood and you want to understand, so smile and politely ask,

“I'm sorry, I didn't understand. Could you please repeat that more slowly?”

And one more hint: Just because you have trouble understanding someone doesn't mean that they have trouble understanding you. So unless someone asks you to, don't assume that you should speak more slowly and certainly not more loudly.

What if your guest doesn't speak English?

This may sound like a speech from Mom and Dad again, but it works. ... Do your best. Be considerate. Be patient. Have a sense of humor. Use body language. If your guest is with another guest, try talking with that person to see if he can help with the communication. And just because your guest doesn't speak English, don't assume he doesn't understand it. Often an understanding of language comes before speaking proficiency.

A language barrier can be a challenge but, like any other challenging guest situation, it shouldn't be viewed as a major interruption, a hassle or a disruption to your work. After all, serving this guest is your work. Show the same amount of respect and dignity that you would want to be shown if you were the customer in a foreign country where you couldn't speak the language. Be a great reflection of your own culture and the culture of your company.

What if your guest's manner of speaking seems abrupt or even rude?

Communication styles vary from culture to culture—even from city to city. Generally speaking, some cultures have a very direct and forward manner of speaking, some have a much more quiet and reticent manner. Some languages have sharper, more intense sounds; some languages sound softer and more dif fused. If you are helping a guest whose manner of speaking seems abrupt or “in your face,” the best thing you can do is relax. Don't read anything personal into it. That's just the way this guest speaks. So don't let yourself fall into a defensive attitude. Just breathe, smile and deliver your very best guest ser vice.

What if you strongly disagree with the cultural style you see?

Maybe someone is wearing something that is offensive to you. Maybe you don't agree with the roles that different genders have in certain cultures. That's OK. You have every right to your personal opinions and beliefs, but they are just that—**personal**. At work, **keep them to yourself**. Do your very best in every situation to keep your personal bias separate from your goal of serving the guest in front of you with 100 percent respect and 100 percent of your attention.

How do you help a guest with physical disabilities?

With the same common courtesies that you use to make any other customer feel like a guest.

“Can I help you find something today?” Or, “How can I help you today?”

Granted, you might offer *additional* help, such as,

“Can I carry that to the counter for you?” Or “Can I reach that for you?”

But you would also offer these courtesies to an elderly guest, so they're not really that out of the ordinary. **It's pretty much common sense, and common courtesy.**

In terms of a guest's physical disability, the key is not to presume that a guest is asking for your help unless he or she really does. For example, don't push a guest's wheelchair unless you have been asked. If a guest who is blind or visually impaired uses a cane for walking, do not take hold of her arm to lead her somewhere. Instead you might say,

“The rest of your party is already seated. I would be happy to take you to join them. Would you like to take my arm or would you like to follow me?”

Either way, it is helpful to talk about where you are going. For example:

It's quite a walk over to the billing department. We are going to go down these steps and then down another hallway.”

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