

How to Build Rapport with Multicultural Clients

by Dr. Nara Venditti



Do you want to expand your customer base and increase revenue? QUIZ: How many of you know that one in five in the US speak a foreign language at home or that 70% of the economic growth in the US is due to minorities? When teaching a workshop on multicultural marketing, typical all hands will go up at the first question and only some at the second question. Yet seldom a hand will go up when I ask if participants know how to go about building rapport with multicultural clientele.

Mastering how to develop strong, lasting, and profitable relationships across cultures in the community may be as easy as remembering an acronym **N.A.R.A.**

Never Assume – Never assume that all clients are like you or that one size fits all. We tend to think that our way is the best way. However, this is not the case. For instance, for one culture making eye contact could be a sign of respect but for another culture avoiding eye contact shows respect. In another example, in many Asian and South American cultures looking down while addressing a customer shows respect while other cultures would consider this to be rude.

Ask - Always ask for their preferences. Our most common behaviors may not apply to all cultures. Rather, as a way of showing respect and gaining confidence, discuss their practices and preferences. For instance, ask questions like, “Would you like to be addressed by your first name or last name?”, “Should I extend my hand first to shake a woman’s hand?”, “Is it appropriate to ask about the customer’s health or family?”, “Should I embrace, bow or shake hands when greeting the customer?”

Relate- Try to relate on many levels. Americans tend to follow the principle “Let’s get down to business” while for other cultures “Let’s get to know each other first” would be more appropriate. A great relationship builder is to use basic phrases in LingioClickSM. For instance try saying “shen-shen”(thank in Chinese), “gracias” (thank you in Spanish) or “shukria” (thank you in the Indian languages) and you will see how your customers’ eyes light up! They may not remember what you said, but they will remember how you made them feel. And, as with most consumers, more often than not our emotions shape our decisions.

Ask the expert – Learn about the cultural norms and values of the immigrant communities in your area by attending ethnic festivals, meeting your potential customers and their leaders face-to-face. Read literature, attend a seminar or organize a workshop. Also try building relationships on their turf and then invite them to your place of business. While we are not expected to be experts in every culture in the world, we should be aware of important issues pertaining to demographics that we want to do business with.

I have outlined a framework for building relationships and rapport across cultures. While it may seem simple, the devil is in details. Keep in mind that cultural competence is not a destination, it is a journey and that those who pay attention to the details will succeed. Follow our column “All About Culture” to learn how to use cultural competence to your advantage.

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