

Jeff Eilertsen

Nairobi to Shanghai: A World of Service



When considering quality of service around the world, many stereotypes can be applied. We may think certain countries or cultures naturally excel at service, while others are very efficient but not very friendly. And we may even see some countries where service appears to be an altogether low priority. Yet while stereotypes persist – and may have basis in personal experience – I have accumulated more and more experience in countries across the globe, and everywhere I teach and travel, I observe 3 things we all have in common:

1. Service expectations are local.

How people understand and evaluate service, especially front line customer service, is based on the world they live in every day. We judge the service we receive by comparing it to our own experience. This everyday experience varies widely for people from Nairobi to Shanghai to Delhi to Seattle. Defining service excellence is relative to what we experience around us.

This is challenging in several ways. Countries with an influx of outside workers experience new demands for, and different understandings of, good service. Workers who “don’t know what they don’t know” can feel challenged by local expectations.

And local customers can feel frustrated by visiting workers.

As global companies struggle to set worldwide standards for service, they would be wise not to insist upon a uniform set of service actions across a wide range of countries. Rather they should insist upon delivering a standard quality of service experience for varied customers around the world – as judged by those customers around the world.

For example, a global retailer realized they could not set the same policies and service measures in Vietnam and Singapore. In Singapore, greeting high-end customers with a polished service mind-set was the local expectation. But in Vietnam, finding parking for cars and bikes was the critical service issue that customers appreciated most. These core expectations were discovered when service staff stood in their customer’s shoes. While very different actions were required, both locations improved the experience of service they provide.

In a world of intersecting cultures and rising expectations, companies who teach their staff to see the customers’ local and evolving point of view will prosper.

2. Enthusiasm for service is global.

Not everyone everywhere will have a naturally strong service mind-set. Selecting staff who serve customers and colleagues well can be a challenge. But in every culture where I have worked, there are leaders and staff at all levels who are genuinely enthusiastic about service. They are professionally driven to grow and improve no matter the level of local service expectations.

And there are people worldwide who value the privilege of serving others. One of my most rewarding activities is asking in workshops what they do outside of work. It is remarkable how many people share their involvement providing service to families and communities in need. There is an innate human desire to serve no matter where you live. Building a culture that encourages people in all roles to channel this desire in constructive ways creates both personal and organizational success.

3. “It’s a small world after all.”

Our world is truly becoming a global community. We can no longer easily stereotype service based on where we are. In all of my workshops I see a growing cross-section of the world.

In a recent company workshop in Europe there were eight nationalities represented. In the

Middle East, seven. In China, while most participants were Chinese, more than half had lived, worked or been educated abroad. Where I am sitting now – writing in a café in Dubai – I can spot a dozen nationalities mixing in business and personal meetings.

It's easy to view countries and cultures through traditional stereotypes. But this limits the potential for creating and receiving surprising service. Rather than stereotyping others, we might better ask, **“What culture of service can we create together by standing in our customer's shoes and leveraging our global diversity?”**

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About the Author

Jeff Eilertsen leads Global Service Education for UP! Your Service, bringing over 20 years of experience working in organizational development, training and human resource firms. As a project leader and Master Trainer, he ensures successful implementation of Actionable Service Education, working with clients to develop the people, processes and best practices to turn learning into action and service improvement.

He also manages a community of Course Leaders from a wide variety of clients, sharing ideas and insights across a global network. As a speaker, Jeff shares the UP! Your Service methodology and experience with audiences seeking to uplift service culture.

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