

## What does Service-Minded mean in various cultures?

Eastern, Western and Southern interpretations

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*The concept of "service-minded" differs between eastern and western cultures. But even within cultures in the East and West, there are differences in the way people of different countries view the idea of service. A lack of appreciation for these differences across cultures can lead to disappointment for both the party at the receiving end and the one providing the service.*

In this article the various cultural concepts of 'service-minded' are defined by a group of local business people from each country. There is no *good* nor *bad*. It is simply the daily reality of the people of that particular culture which may or may not meet our expectations.



We try to illustrate what good service or being "service-minded" means in a variety of situations such as collaboration on projects, outsourcing, call centers and sales.

We start with some examples of the Philippines versus Japan, Singapore versus India, and the Netherlands versus the USA and India, accompanied by the respective interpretations of good service. We also look at interpretations

from Thailand, Germany, the UK, South Africa, Brazil and Poland.

### Philippines

The Filipino has an innate desire to please others and be accepted by them. Being service-minded means to serve the customer in a manner that will elicit a positive response. Process and standards are less important than making the customer feel special. Filipino customers are satisfied if they are made to feel important and to get concessions that were not given to others. Good service is case-to-case and there is a lot of flexibility exercised, sometimes to the point of breaking rules in the name of pleasing the customer. Service providers are also expected to be warm and friendly and never to get into a discussion with the customer.

A Filipino may wonder why his efforts were not appreciated by a Japanese prospective client when he had gone out of his way to make a good presentation, provided value-added services to his offering and treated the client to a dinner at a fabulous restaurant. The Japanese however had a negative impression of the Filipino since he arrived 30 minutes late for their meeting. In the Philippines, however, this is hardly considered late at all and is quite forgivable.

## **Japan**

“In Japan, there is no service unless three foundational requirements are satisfied. The first is good behavior. This means punctuality at all times, showing of respect, politeness and a general refinement of speech and conduct. The second is personal appearance which requires the person to be clean and neatly dressed and wearing the appropriate attire. Third is the environment. The space must be clean and orderly and pleasing to the eye in all aspects. To the Japanese, attention to detail, packaging and overall quality of the product or service is important.

The three basic foundations of service are must-haves. Without them there is no service to speak of. Only when all three are satisfied can any service differentiators be added.

## **Singapore**

The Singaporeans take a more western standard approach to service. Service is imbedded into most processes and is therefore delivered in an efficient, consistent and predictable way. Because of this, there is usually less flexibility in bending the rules or changing the process for a customer who asks for things to be done differently. The Singaporeans also take pride in the success of their country and in how well things are run and will tend to feel there is no need to change things that work.

A Singaporean businessman outsources back-office processes to India. He notices delays in the turn-around time of some transactions and informs the Indian team about it. The Indian team immediately examines the client's problem and decides that they can reduce the transaction time to half by cutting out some steps they do not deem to be important. This still produces the output but within a much shorter time period. They are sure this will delight their Singaporean end user and are surprised when the Singaporean is upset because they did not follow the exact procedure and took a lot of short cuts.

## **India**

Service-minded in India is defined as the ability to provide the “best” solution to a need or wish. But the best solution is what is best in the eyes of the person providing the service rather than what the customer actually wants. The Indians have pride and confidence in their abilities and will tend to believe they know what the customer needs even before gathering enough information and consulting the customer. They will then pour much effort into delivering the output and trying their best to meet deadlines even if it might entail sacrificing some portion of the product or giving up some quality. Sometimes they will even try to give more in terms of quantity than what they think the customer wants. Politeness and good social skills are not as important as being able to give “more”.

A Dutch sales person of a popular computer store in Amsterdam serves many foreigners each day. At the end of a busy day he explains to his boss; "The American prospects take up too much of my time. Americans want every detail explained and expect me to remain friendly and smiling.

"The Indian prospects are usually very demanding in terms of keeping my attention when they just look around. They speak to me as if I am their servant.

"Dutch prospects however usually are informed via internet about the products they want to buy when they come into the store. They do not expect me to explain a lot. They will ask specific questions. They understand that I don't have much time."

### **The Netherlands**

The Dutch service provider or sales person usually serves clients according to standard rules and procedures and not according to how he can serve the client best and most efficiently. He treats his client as his equal, an approach which finds its roots in the local concept of equality. The Dutch do not believe in the exchange of politeness if the only purpose is to please the client, which is seen as emphasizing *inequality* and is perceived to be dishonest. Clear and direct communication without any social lubricants is experienced as blunt by most foreigners. The service provider expects the client to ask questions about services instead of automatically providing information. Usually the client is held responsible for knowing the rules of the service provider and is expected to read the small print.

### **USA**

In the US, service providers usually give a prompt and friendly reply to emails or phone calls. In shops and restaurants people attend to their customers with a smile. However, the expressed eagerness to help accompanied by a summary of actions and time lines in very direct language, may be intimidating for non-Americans. Service providers are trained to treat customers as equals, as 'pals' even, and may use informal language and conversation. They're there to help, but not to 'serve' you.

### **China**

Mainland China has earned a reputation for being a low cost producer of goods that are also accepted to be not of the highest quality. Because of the significantly lower price, the Chinese producers and their customers take the "good enough" attitude to quality. This mindset prevails in the Chinese concept of service – if one expects a low price, don't expect a high level of service.

### **Thailand**

If a list was to be made of countries which could act as representatives of the phrase 'service with a smile', then Thais would definitely be at the top of the list. Thais seem to be obsessed with their culture of "*kraeng-jai*" –

which roughly translates to "being considerate and thoughtful to others and their feelings". Whether it is the roadside vendor selling his or her food or staff inside the up-market shopping malls and five star hotels. This nature of Thais is what a first time visitor will always notice. Thais are also known for their calm nature and patience. Their attitude of "*mai pen rai*" (which simply means "no problem") has a lot to do with it. Whenever faced with a problem, they will calmly brush them aside, saying "*mai pen rai*" and move on with their lives.

However, these same traits which attract so many tourists from different countries (including Western countries) can be very frustrating for the Westerners who are doing business here. They feel that Thais try a bit too hard to please others and in that process, end up missing the real agenda.

### **Germany**

"Der Kunde ist König" ("the client is the king") is an old German saying that all service personnel are expected to take to heart. A service-minded German fulfils the rather stereotypic characteristics of punctuality and reliability. Effectiveness equals service-minded when it comes to problem solving at customer service or call centres. Germans take being service minded as a serious task. A bit of of American friendliness would lighten up this approach.

### **United Kingdom**

In the UK, service retains a level of formality. Attendants may be more likely to explain the reasons why something can't be delivered to help the client understand the situation. Being 'fair' to others is highly valued in the UK and will be considered when treating clients. It may be effective for service providers since customers may be deterred from asking for extra service. However, for some foreign customers it may not be a very pleasant way to communicate. Sales people and waiters usually lack the friendly smile but are more polite than in any other European country.

### **South Africa**

In South Africa 'client is king', as in Germany. Rendering services are mostly connected to a feeling of loyalty to a client. Service providers are treated as professionals and clients expect good quality and service. An arrogant attitude from the service provider is not tolerated. Clients may ask how busy a service provider is to get an indication of whether the provider has time for their project to keep risks at a minimum. When one promotes the idea of being very busy, one may lose the opportunity to get new projects. This is in contrast to many other cultures where being very busy is seen as a positive indication that one attracts and retains clients because they have a reputation for doing good work.

### **Brazil**

The initial nature of the Brazilian posture is very serviceable, sometimes almost subservient when the retainer of services, person or company, is perceived to be on an upper level. Clients with great buying potential get prompt attention and quality service. Middle size, small corporations or

individuals demanding basic service of any kind is rarely supplied on time or with quality. It is not uncommon for certain requests for services never to be acknowledged. This is mainly because the demand for services and products is much greater than suppliers can meet. Suppliers rarely prioritize the planning and organization needed to create a stable infrastructure to meet these demands.

### **Poland**

A service provider in Poland may be very creative in finding solutions for his clients. In a good clients/service provider relationship he will go out of his way to try to satisfy the client and will inform the client extensively how much personal effort it takes to accommodate his demands. This is a way of bonding with the client and should not be understood as a complaint. Being felt respected by the client motivates the Polish sales person or service provider to improve his service. In case the client/service provider relationship is not optimal or just incidental the client may expect to be served strictly according to the rules. This may take more time and money. The Polish sales person or service provider is used to praise his products and services in superlatives. The client may expect many questions. A friendly smile is not always included in the service.

### ***How to Bridge the Differences?***

*It is important for people working in an intercultural setting to recognize the differences and understand how the other parties define good service so that they can set expectations and address gaps.*



*Here are some tips that may help:*

- *Be clear and specific about service expectations both in terms of what is needed and what is not needed.*
- *Where applicable and possible, use globally accepted standards of quality. If these are not available, define standards that all parties understand and agree to comply with.*
- *Shorten feedback cycle times and try to see output on a frequent basis. Actively seek to know the status of the service, projects or assignments. Do not assume that "no news is good news". Many cultures believe that having problems is bad service and will not speak up until it is too late.*
- *Reward the desired behavior. When you feel that the level of service is good, express your satisfaction so that the behavior and practice will be reinforced. Did you appreciate the politeness of the other person, the intelligent response to your question, the respect with which you were treated, the quality of the service or product, or something else? Take into consideration though that in the Netherlands and Scandinavia many compliments make people suspicious.*
- *Conversely, give constructive feedback (in a nice way) if there are gaps that need to be addressed or some areas where effort is being*

- put on services that you do not value.*
- *Make sure that the common language used (usually English) is well understood. Check if you understood your service provider well by summarizing his words frequently. Check if you are understood by asking questions. If you collaborate on a projects summarize telephone conversations in an email.*
  - *When calling for service with a service center e.g. a telephone company, ask for the name of the person and call him by his name. If you are switched from one department to another write down whom you spoke to and of which department and for how long. You may need this information in the future or for eventual feedback and claims.*
  - *Always keep in mind that the daily reality of those you do business with may be very different from yours.*

**“There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”  
Leonard Cohen**

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