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New Zealand businesses need to integrate better with immigrant groups

When it comes to immigrant groups, it is New Zealand businesses which should be 'integrating' with the diverse cultural needs of those groups, rather than the other way around.

CEO of New Zealand's largest customer service training provider, Simon Nikoloff of KiwiHost New Zealand, says most Kiwis expect a certain level of cultural integration from immigrants, but when it comes to businesses who aspire to deliver good customer service, the shoe is well and truly on the other foot.

"Customer service and the way we treat people of other cultures in the business context can be a minefield because it poses questions about treating people differently, which traditionally hasn't been the Kiwi way.

"It's also open to debate whether many immigrants want to be treated differently. My suggestion is that if you want to excel in customer service, then yes, you should treat people of different ethnic backgrounds differently. They might not expect it, but they will appreciate it all the more.

"By that I mean respecting the different communication needs that people have and better understanding their cultural cues so that we can give them a better experience. Avoid expecting people from different cultural backgrounds to fall into line and behave and think the way we do – particularly if you want to keep them as loyal customers."

Mr Nikoloff says a bloody minded attitude of 'my way or the highway' really benefits no-one at the end of the day.

"Choose your language carefully by cutting out or explaining jargon and colloquialisms. If we want to build bridges, we need to yield a little as well.

"When my wife Shirley worked at a garden centre, the centre only had a token handful of Asian customers because nobody thought to take the time to build relationships, or had the patience to get around language barriers. Once my wife started doing this, her Asian customers brought other Asian customers who ask specifically for Shirley. In this way she was able to build a loyal and profitable customer base.

"Language is always going to be a barrier. In Shirley's instance, the names of some plants were difficult for Asian people to pronounce. By taking the time to go out and look at the plants with the customer and to work with them by making the effort to communicate and demonstrate different concepts, Shirley broke through the barriers."

Mr Nikoloff says patience, friendliness, a willingness to understand, to help and taking responsibility for the communication in the relationship are invaluable in learning how other people think so that we can better connect with them and achieve the outcomes we are after.

"It is interesting to note – being in both the customer service and training spheres – the common denominators between the two. Using a person's name and making an attempt to understand how to pronounce that name correctly, is important in engaging with people in both environments. Write their name down and then practice it.



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“People will appreciate the effort, and the reality is that people enjoy communicating across the language barrier; it can be fun. They wouldn’t be here in New Zealand if they didn’t want to participate in a new country.

“Show and demonstrate tolerance and especially respect, no matter if you are nervous, shy, confused, pushed for time or irritable; anything less will result in less that positive outcomes,” he says.

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