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SIGHT & SOUNDS by XANDRIA OOI

A strange service culture

The key to good service is in the conversation, body language and the ability to think on one's feet.



HELLO!" I said to the woman at the reception desk of a hotel restaurant.

Dressed in a uniform, she was standing alone, in front of a stand which cradled a book which had a list of names written on it. I thought it was safe to presume that she worked there.

At my greeting, she looked up and seemed a little surprised, as though she was at home and I was an unexpected visitor knocking on her door.

"Uh ... I have a reservation?" I asked a little hesitantly.

She ran her pencil down the list, got my name and led us to our table. All the while, I had the feeling that we were intruding.

I have experienced this before; the feeling of invading the salesperson's privacy as I enter an empty shop, or when paying for a purchase, the cashier acts as though she is doing me a favour when ringing up the bill.

It is not bad service; it is *strange* service.

My brother-in-law Yu Jin, just came back from a holiday in the United States. One of the first things he told me was how every single waiter or waitress he met talked to him as though he was an old friend.

"It does not matter whether it's a fast food joint or a classy restaurant, they have no problems chatting with you," he said.

Although the tipping culture in the US makes for better effort when it comes to service, I wonder — if Malaysia had a similar tipping system, would we make conversation as easily as the Americans?

Let's think about it. The American education system encourages participation in classrooms. You raise your hand, ask questions, challenge the answers and participate in presentations.

The Malaysian education system? Not so much.

I remember sitting in my Form Five class and trying to get my classmate to raise her hand when she knew the answer to the question the teacher was asking.

We are trained from a very young age to only speak when spoken to. I recall from my



own experiences in a Chinese and national school, that it was considered rebellious to question anything a teacher said.

Of course, there were teachers who encouraged questions, but they were few and far between. As a result, we grow into adulthood and enter the workforce as people who only do what is needed and speak only when necessary.

Hence, starting and maintaining a conversation with complete strangers, even if there is money as an incentive, may not be as easy as one may think.

Understanding this should be the basis of training in the service industry in this country.

We can get frustrated at those working in the service industry who seem inadequate when it comes to speaking to customers — to joke, banter, or provide information — but the root of the problem is not about being incapable — they have to unlearn before they can relearn.

Just like dating, if we were not brought up in a household where teasing, bantering and chattering was the norm, it could be a little awkward talking to a guy or girl we fancy; even when we are putting all our effort into it.

There is also the irony that sometimes, the more effort we put into something, the less natural and more awkward it becomes. It's the process of 'trying' that we cannot avoid if we want to master something.

Before we learn how to walk gracefully, we go through the awkward stage of wobbling on shaky knees. Coming from a Chinese school, I never realised that the placement of my tongue could affect the way English words were pronounced.

When I knew that and started practising my Ts and Ds, it was an awkward process; I sounded funny when I spoke, but I could not escape the transitional period if I wanted to improve.

In any job or profession, there is usually a learning process. If we are lucky, we have a

mentor to guide us through this. If not, like the majority of people I have spoken to, we jump into the deep end of the ocean and learn on the job.

Those who are good swimmers surface at the other end of the pool with better swimming techniques to go faster. Those who can't swim, sink.

When this happens, the problem for any company is that those who are sinking are still in the pool. They still come in to work on a daily basis, struggling and feeling increasingly frustrated.

For these folks, the 'trying' process can be very depressing.

If the process of learning can already bring about such vast problems, both for the individual and the company, then the un-learning process is one that rarely happens or is even acknowledged.

Habits are formed so firmly over time that in order to break them, the level of awareness, change in mindset and effort required is tremendous.

Both the employer and employee have to invest time and sometimes, money, to break old habits to make way for new ones. Yet, to stop a problem from repeating, it is extremely crucial to address the root of the problem and not just the symptoms.

Of course, one would say that to minimise or eliminate the un-learning process altogether would be to simply hire the right person for the right job, but that does not happen all the time.

Where customer service is crucial to a company, eye contact, a smile, gesture or greeting can make a world of difference.

It sounds incredibly simple to say but the key to good service is in the conversation, body language and the ability to think on one's feet.

While to be amazing at all three may be difficult, it is not impossible either.

The service industry in Malaysia is not bad, but it is not amazing either. This country has potential to be incredible but like anything worth having, it just takes hard work.