

# Cultural Dimensions in a Restaurant Setting

By Kevin Murphy and Marryam Khan

## Employees Perspective

Cindy has worked at a restaurant in the tourist area of International drive in Orlando for approximately one year. She is known as a good, hard-working waitress that tries her best to perform her duties in an effective and efficient manner. Cindy is very friendly and an excellent waitress in interactions with international customers.

One evening, the restaurant's hostess sat a couple at one of Cindy's tables. The staff had already made small talk with the customers and learned it was their first time at this restaurant and they were in Orlando vacationing. Cindy promptly walked over to the couple, introduced herself and asked how they were doing this evening? She then proceeded to ask them what drinks they would like to order. After returning with the customer's order, she proceeded to carefully take their food order and then confirmed their order. This was followed by the routine of serving the appetizers, providing the main courses, and clearing the dirty dishes on the table. During the process of serving their meal, Cindy approached them to ask if everything was okay? At the time, the customers said they didn't need anything but after a few minutes another waitress came up to Cindy and told her that the customers wanted extra sauce with their main course. Cindy was confused about why the customers did not ask her for the sauce and instead asked another waitress for assistance? Meanwhile, the other waitress brought the couple extra sauce. Later, Cindy approached the customers' a second time to ask if they needed anything, the customer's said everything was OK. Cindy then suggested a doggy bag for the leftovers and suggested to review the dessert menu.

As with every customer, Cindy did her best to treat the guests well, be friendly and courteous. Cindy provided prompt service and assured their food arrived quickly and efficiently. However, after the couple left, she was disappointed to find a tip amount of much less than 15%. This left Cindy feeling rather de-motivated and disappointed. It also left her wondering, what did she do wrong?

## Customer Perspective

Ali and Fatima had a rather long, tiring day at the Orlando Theme Parks and at last, dinner time had arrived. The couple chose a res-

taurant that was close to their hotel for a pleasant dinner where they could unwind after their long day and have a hearty meal. Their concierge advised them to try this restaurant since it was a casual dining restaurant with a classy but inexpensive menu in a comfortable environment. Once Ali and Fatima stepped into the restaurant, the hostess showed them to their table and asked them if they were from out of town? Ali said that they are from out of town and in Orlando on vacation. The hostess let them know that their waitress this evening will be "Cindy". In only a few minutes Cindy had arrived. Cindy introduced herself and asked "Can I get you started off with some drinks?" Ali and Fatima both placed an order of drinks, but before Ali could proceed with ordering some appetizers and the main course, Cindy said she would be back with the drinks.

While waiting for their drinks to arrive, Ali wondered, "Why didn't the waitress take the order all at once?" Cindy arrived with the drinks and then asked "Would you like to start off with some appetizers?" Ali replied "we're still deciding on the appetizers". Cindy replied "well, our most popular appetizer is the flat bread". Fatima and Ali exchange glances and pondered for a while, finally deciding on having flat bread to share. Ali and Fatima also pondered over the main courses; Cindy interjects and advises them that the Pork Chops are the chef's recommendation. But Ali points out that they don't eat pork and would prefer seafood dishes as their main course. Accordingly, Cindy made recommendations to the couple and wrote an order for their main courses, she confirmed their order and left to input the order into the computer. Fatima thought, "Why is this waitress making recommendations without being asked?"

While sipping on their drinks, Ali and Fatima discussed their day, a short time passed and the appetizers arrived. They both dug into the warm dish enjoying the wonderful flavors. As they crunch on the flat bread Cindy arrived and points at Fatima's glass, which is more than half empty and asks "would you like a refill?" Fatima spent a few seconds swallowing the food in her mouth, so she said, "yes please"; Cindy leaves to refill Fatima's drink. Fatima looked at Ali slightly confused and asked, "Why didn't she just provide a refill without asking?"

The last two pieces of flat bread were left on the plate. Fatima and Ali mutually slowed down their eating pace and began discussing their plans for tomorrow. They both were suddenly interrupted when Cindy suddenly arrived and grabbed the edge of the plate saying, "Let

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me get that out of the way for you". Fatima quickly told her, "No, we're still eating it". She says "no problem" and is off again to assist her other customers. Ali turned to Fatima saying, "Why is she in such a hurry?"

Cindy returned with the main courses rather quickly, to which Ali responds with surprise that "the food arrived rather quickly", even before the couple had a chance to finish their appetizers. Fatima and Ali begin eating their main courses right away, being rather hungry, and after a few bites of eating Cindy came back asking, "How is everything so far?" The couple takes a moment to swallow their food before letting her know that everything was good. They also make a mental note of how helpful Cindy is trying to be. However, as soon as Cindy left the table, Ali remembered that he would like some extra cocktail sauce. He waited a minute and Cindy was nowhere in sight. After a while, he saw Cindy approach a table slightly away from his. He tried to signal her to get her attention, but she was completely engaged with her other customers.

Ali saw another waitress come his way and signaled her instead to get some extra cocktail sauce. Obviously that waitress let Cindy know so Cindy brought back the sauce. Having eaten rather fast, half way through their food, the couple sat back and continued talking about what their plans are for tomorrow. After a few minutes of discussion Cindy arrives again and asks, "Can I get you anything else?" Ali says "No, thank you". After she left, Ali tells Fatima, "She's a funny waitress. When you don't need her, she comes; and, when you need her, she's not there."

After a short while, the couple found themselves almost done with their food, but since they were having a detailed conversation, their eating pace decreased. Cindy arrived once again, this time suggesting some desserts. The couple thought that was rather odd since they were not quite done with their main course yet. When they said "No, thank you", Cindy then suggested a box for the leftovers. Now, the couple felt as if she was definitely in a hurry and wanted them to leave. After placing their leftovers in a box, she arrived back to the table with the check. Fatima looked at Ali confused and asked, "Did you even ask her for the check?" It seemed more apparent that the waitress wanted the couple to leave and felt hurried. Ali was told that in America they give tips to waitresses, which are not included on the check. Ali briefly analyzed the service. Even though the waitress seemed to be in a hurry, interrupted dinner repeatedly, and wasn't around when needed, she still tried to be as helpful and efficient as possible. He understood that this may be the American way of dining. Keeping that in mind, he paid the bill in cash and left a 12% tip, which is much more than he is accustomed to tipping.

### ***Should American restaurants in international tourist locations change their dining service?***

Orlando is ranked as the 9th port of entry for overseas tourists, and it has a 3.1% market share of overseas visitors in the United States (Office of Travel and Tourism Industries, 2012). Moreover, the Office of

Travel and Tourism Industries (2012), indicates that the top 10 markets for international tourist travel to the U.S.A. are: Canada, Mexico, Japan, United Kingdom (UK), Brazil, Germany, South Korea, France, China and Australia. Each country is unique in their customs, norms, etiquettes, traditions and general restaurant dining attributes. Furthermore, each country provides a unique perspective to their dining experience in the United States. Keeping in mind the importance of these perspectives and cultural differences, restaurants in the United States can attempt to cater to these cultural differences to provide a more satisfactory dining experience.

Previous literature has indicated the importance of the quality of intercultural service encounter for a business to monitor and control (Barker & Charmine, 2004). The quality of service has been a debated topic in academic literature. Studies have shown that the dimensions of service quality differ by culture (Furrer et al., 2000). Winsted (1999) study showed that Japanese customers used dimensions to evaluate a service different than those used by American customers. Moreover, the evaluation of service performance was also to be found different based on culture in a study conducted by Reisinger and Turner (1999). Research has highlighted the importance of cross-cultural perceptions; however, these results are yet to be applied in a restaurant environment.

Zeithaml et al. (1990) researched gaps in service delivery, predominantly on customer expectations and experience. The research developed the service quality (SERVQUAL) framework. Zeithaml et al.'s (1990) research has been used in multiple studies to measure customer perceptions and expectations in a hotel setting. However, limited research exists on the applicability of Zeithaml et al.'s research in a restaurant setting. These studies were conducted primarily using an American sample and there is a lack of academic literature using SERVQUAL with a cross-cultural sample. However, Armstrong et al. (1997), conducted research using the SERVQUAL method in Hong Kong and found that expectations differ greatly in various cultural groups.

A study conducted by Kee-Fu Tsang and Ap (2007) showed that Western customers placed emphasis on efficiency, time savings and goal completion. Research has emphasized the varying perception of "time" among cultures (Kaynak et al., 2011; Legohérel et al., 2009). On the other hand, practitioners and researchers have created models and studied dining behavior in order to increase table turnover rates in restaurants (Bloom et al., 2012). Furthermore, table turnover rate has been strongly linked to the maximizing revenues in American restaurants (Bloom et al., 2012). Hwang (2008) researched customers being dissatisfied by waiting for a table, demonstrating the importance of seat turnover in a restaurant. However, American restaurants seem to be caught in the dilemma of choosing between having dissatisfied customers because of feeling pushed out of a restaurant, or dissatisfied customers waiting too long for a table.

The current tipping norm in the United States has generated much discussion. There are two forms of tipping. "Per se" tipping is one regularly practiced in American restaurants. It is developed as an extra surcharge to the total bill and varies from 15%-20% of the entire check (Walker, 2008). On the other hand, various other countries around the world practice a "service compris" tipping model. This model includes tax and service charge within the price of the meal. As a result, a customer pays solely for the check, with no extra tipping surcharge (Shaw, 2005). The custom of tipping American wait staff was developed to motivate wait staff to perform their duties well, so they receive a tip. However, studies have shown that customers don't necessarily tip based on service experience, but tip based on social pressure (Lynn, 2001). Furthermore, studies have shown that racial discrimination does take place while tipping and server's attractiveness affects their tips as well (Lynn et. al., 2008; Lynn, 2009). Tourists could be exempt from contributing to more tipping discrepancies, by adding service charge to overall menu pricing.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Should restaurants in Orlando, which cater to international tourists, change their tipping policy by including it on checks? Or making gratuity suggestions when the customers receive their checks?
- Should restaurants alter their table turnover policy for restaurants catering to tourists?
- Is it beneficial for waiters and waitresses to be trained on cross-cultural training or intercultural sensitivity, so as to better accommodate customer's preferences and differences?
- What boundaries or limits on wait staff friendliness should be taken into account with international customers?
- Are there some environmental attributes expected by international customers when eating at a casual-dining restaurant?
- What are some dietary concerns regarding international tourists that can be taken into accommodation?