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## Understanding Cultures

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*An essential guide to doing business in multi-racial communities*

By Sally Fagan

When I am talking to export executives about cultural awareness I will often ask 'How many contracts have you lost through lack of skill in another language?' The answer may be difficult to quantify for them even if they know that they have lost some. I then go on to ask 'How many contracts have you lost through lack of cultural awareness?' Now this question poses a bit of a conundrum. If you are not aware of subtle cultural differences, how can you possibly know if you have lost business because of it? It would be easy to blame the lost contract on market conditions, price or not quite meeting the specification when in fact the underlying cause may have been a cultural blunder.

Most sales people in the healthcare industry in the UK are not dealing with export, but we do have an increasing number of people working in primary and secondary healthcare who are of overseas origin. Yes, they may be second generation and have been to school in this country, but for many their cultural traditions and ties to their country of origin still influence their behaviours in various ways. Many of us of UK origin are not sensitised to these influences and may be making false assumptions that can affect our business. We may easily fall into the trap of assuming that just because a doctor, for example, speaks English without an accent and was educated in this country, he or she has accepted all our values and way of thinking, and that culture difference doesn't enter the equation.

I was lucky enough to spend nearly four years living and working in Singapore. It is a modern metropolis with more MacDonalds per head of population than anywhere else in the world. English is one of the official languages and is the one most used for government and commerce. Western influences are everywhere, and it was easy to be lulled into a false sense of security that to do business, all you had to do was assume our normal Western values. The longer I was there however, the more I realised that their value system was very much less Western than outward appearances would suggest, and for the Chinese population at least, their Chinese value system ran much deeper than anything Western that they had taken on at a superficial level. In this country too, we are on dangerous ground if we ignore ethnic origin, since outward appearances may be deceiving.

It may even be that the person him or herself does not realise what makes them accept or not accept the sales person in front of them. Someone of Arab origin may have been brought up with the belief that the left hand is only used for cleansing, and whilst long years in the Western world will have taught them that no such difference exists in the Western culture, they may still feel uneasy at being handed something from a salesman's left hand. If it doesn't register in their conscious mind, deep down the sub-conscious mind might be saying 'This salesman has just insulted me, there's something about him that I don't like and therefore if I have a choice, I will use another company's products.'

A good salesperson aims to overcome objections and lead the client logically to a sale, whether that sale is to try the product in the first instance or buy a large quantity. A pharmaceutical representative does not normally have the facility to walk out of the door with a signed order in the hand, which gives the doctor far more scope to choose to use an equivalent product from a competitor if they feel more at ease with the competitor's representative.

In the space of a short article it would be impossible to outline all the differences a salesperson may encounter. So I believe it will be more beneficial to look at how differences arise and what sort differences may be there, so you can build up pictures yourselves of why a client may have different values to yourself.

To have an appreciation of others' values, we first need to look at our own and our attitude towards them. We often tend to generalize about other cultures, 'they're lazy', 'they're cold' 'they're superficial' and many will say the 'British way is best'. Whatever country we are from, we all have a certain amount of arrogance, and we judge others by our own values. So our first principle in dealing with other cultures is to remember that our way of doing things is not better than others, nor worse than others, just different.

I split cultural differences into four main categories: spoken language, body language, manners, and customs and systems. We can see where these differences arise by considering the facts that affect, or have affected different countries. Once we know the facts about a country we can create models or stereotypes which can help us understand how people coming from there or originate from that country may think. However, just as we may consider ourselves not a stereotypical British person, so we must always be prepared to find that others don't fit the stereotypes of their culture either. The rule here is, remember to treat people individually, not as models or stereotypes which may be used to guide rather than dictate.

Knowing facts will help us to see what attitudes exist and why. These will influence behaviour patterns which in turn will govern communication. Facts may be  
geographical (e.g. Great Britain is an island)  
historical (e.g. the development of America is relatively recent)  
political (e.g. Singapore broke away politically as a city nation from Malaysia in the 1960s)  
demographic (e.g. Japan is over-populated)

Let us look at an example of how such facts can influence how we sell.

Fact: Germany was reunified after 40 years.

Attitude: young people in the original Federal Republic were frustrated that their money was going to rebuild a country which they had never known to be part of theirs, and 'their' jobs were being given to East Germans.

Behaviour: For the first time they felt financially insecure and worried about their future. They became resistant to change.

Communication: if we are trying to sell to a German national, we have to realise that they may be less likely than us to give up what they are comfortable with (i.e. an existing supplier) to take a risk with a new supplier. We have to communicate total trustworthiness and perseverance to become accepted before we can sell.

Similarly the fact that Japan (and other Asian countries) are demographically over-populated has led to comfort zones being smaller. If we step backwards from a hand shake to re-establish our own comfort zone, we may make them feel distinctly uncomfortable and create the feeling that we are 'cold' or that we don't really like their company.

So when faced with what we might perceive as 'odd' behaviour from a client, rather than condemning him or her for it, it's worth taking a step back and considering what it might be in their culture that has influenced it and if we can modify our communication to fit.

When you are meeting with someone from a different cultural origin for the first time, here are some tips to help stop you falling into the culture trap:

- Speak slowly and clearly
- Check and recheck
- Be direct
- Be specific
- Give them time
- Mind your manners
- Don't be funny
- Convey consideration and goodwill
- Don't make hasty judgments
- Think people not foreigners.