Learn more than language to sell more

Many years ago, I was planning a trip to Saudi Arabia and Syria for a consulting project. This project would put me in direct contact with local nationals of those countries, with little or no input from Westerners.

I prepared for the trip by taking some lessons in basic Arabic so I could not so easily be led astray in the negotiations. I then bought a copy of the Koran and took time to read that book of the Muslim world.

I then read it a second time. It was fascinating. This book lead me to find a history book of the Middle East.

If you think _Lord of the Rings_ is intriguing and exciting,

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Learn what you can on history, culture before you get there

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you will be flabbergasted by the real-life history of the Middle East. This is an unbelievably rich and intricate story full of wars, intrigues, alliances and broken alliances.

Through these readings I began to understand the “soul” of the Arabic tribes and countries and of the Arabic world. I was by no means an expert, but at least I was not totally ignorant.

I certainly had an advantage over anyone who was coming in cold.

At one point in my visit to Saudi Arabia, I was invited by a wealthy sheik to share a traditional Bedouin dinner with him and other associates from Arabic countries. My competitor was also invited.

Because I had taken the time to learn about the culture, to speak a few words and to adapt to the dining etiquette of the Bedouin, I was treated as guest of honor and handed the contract.

I think my competitor is still trying to figure out how to stop a servant from pouring gahwa into his cup and how to eat with his right hand only.

The purpose of having this edge in knowledge is not to be able to show off, however. The knowledge will help you to understand and to ask intelligent and relevant questions, and perhaps to have an insight into the answers.

In sales, it is good to ask intelligent, probing questions even if you think you already know the answer. (A topic for a later article.)

All salesmen are taught that building trust is the key to successful selling. In order to build trust we try to develop a rapport with the client and hopefully cement a bond.

Developing this relationship and the ensuing trust is a major first step to developing a long-term client.

For some companies, trust is built in. When we buy from a well-known online retailer, we trust that we will receive what we ordered and that the quality will be acceptable.

There is no salesman necessary to build this trust. The brand name of the company has the trust associated with it.

Also the value of the purchase may determine the level of trust. A purchase of $19.95 requires a lower level of trust than one of $1,995.

We are fortunate as salespeople that most products cannot be sold directly. The intervention of a salesperson is usually required. Especially in international sales, with all the inherent complications, the role of the salesperson becomes vital.

So, we, as salespeople, have to work hard to develop our rapport-building capabilities in spite of strange cultures and languages.

We must be professional chameleons.

There are various tools that can help us to understand the country and culture we will be visiting.

Certainly books such as: Bow or Shake Hands and Dummy & Bradstreet’s Guide to Doing Business Around the World are helpful. But there are other books that will give us better insights into the particular country we are planning to visit.

A country’s culture is made up of many elements. Some of these typically are:

- language
- religion
- customs

It is amazing how a culture is transmitted through its language. Every language has three basic components - vocabulary, grammar and style of speaking.

While vocabulary and grammar are necessary to speak a language, they may not be enough to let the culture be felt. Many people can speak other languages, but with their native intonation. This carries little of the culture.

If you can adopt the tone of the language, then you might feel the culture.

Learning the language of every country you visit as a global chameleon is impossible - I knew that was the case with my visit to the Middle East - but religion and history can be excellent vehicles to understand the culture of a country.

When you are traveling the world, realize that peoples are different. Try to understand those differences so you can more easily build a relationship with a client built on trust and respect.

Most other cultures have an understanding of us, no matter how erroneous, due to the heavy presence of American movies, music and television shows.

We usually have little understanding of these other cultures because of our isolation. We have to work at acquiring knowledge and understanding.

The next time you travel to new lands, leave the latest novel or business bestseller at home. Instead read about the religion, history and culture of the countries you will visit. It will make you stand out as a salesperson and an American.

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