

Importance of Cross-Cultural Empathy in Selling – Perspective from Asian Indians living in the U.S.

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the importance of cross-cultural awareness in a customer – salesperson relationship by studying how Asian Indians living in the U.S interact with American salespeople. The study adapted a phenomenological research design and conducted interviews with 52 Asian Indians living in the U.S. Results of the study showed that first and second generation Asian Indian had significant differences of expectations interacting with salespeople. First generation Asian Indians preferred purchasing from salespeople who were similar to them because they had similar experiences and expectations which made it easier for them to relate to each other. First generation Asian Indians found that it would be easier to communicate with Indian salespeople and they would be more trustworthy. Second generation Asian Indians preferred purchasing from American salespeople and felt comfortable communicating in English compared to their native language. This study provides valuable insights to salespeople who interact with Asian Indian consumers in the U.S.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Awareness, Empathy, Acculturation, Assimilation, Asian Indians

Introduction

Today's highly changing and competitive consumer markets are forcing salespeople to seek more creative and flexible ways for meeting competition. Many salespeople have responded to these challenges by building a collaborative relationship with customers (Frankwick, Porter, & Crosby, 2001). In order to build such collaborative and mutually beneficial relationships, it is important that salespeople and customers have a good understanding of each other (Sharma, 2001; Spaulding & Plank, 2007). Considering the concept of personal selling, selling is a process where success depends on the salesperson's ability in identifying and satisfying the needs of the customer (Evans and Laskin, 1994). In order to identify customers' needs, it is important that salespeople have empathy towards customers. As the United States entered the 21st century, it found itself with a more diverse population than ever in its 250-year history. The U.S. population consists of many different ethnicities and races which are enriched by different cultures and values. As a result, customers who come from different cultures have different needs and wants, therefore, more than ever before, it is very important for salespeople to understand customers' cultures and values in providing them solutions for their concerns and needs. The objective of this study is to understand the importance of cross-cultural awareness in a customer – salesperson relationship by studying how Asian Indians living in the U.S interact with American Salespeople.

Literature Review

Empathy

During early years, empathy researchers defined empathy as taking the role of the other (Mead, 1934); listening with the third ear (Reik, 1948); vicarious introspection (Kohut, 1959); emotional knowing (Greenson, 1960). Many of the conceptualizations of empathy encompass caring, helping, communication, and interaction between participants in an exchange (Greenson, 1960; Stotland, 1969; Davis, 1983; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988; Rogers, Clow & Kash, 1994).

Bohart and Greenberg's (1997) definitions of empathy include the idea of "trying to sense, perceive, share, or conceptualize how another person is experiencing the world". Dymond (1949) conceptualized empathy as "the imaginative transposing of oneself into the thinking, feeling, and acting of another and so structuring the world as he does", and Kohut (1984) saw empathy as the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person. Researchers have defined empathy as a multi-dimensional construct that includes cognitive and affective empathy (Eisenberg, Fabes, Schaller, & Miller, 1989; Feshbach, 1982; Hoffman, 1984). Feshbach (1982) offers a conceptual model for empathy that includes three components; a cognitive ability to discriminate among affective states of others; a second, more advanced cognitive ability to assume the perspective and role of another person; and third, an emotional response.

Cross- Cultural Empathy (Cultural Empathy)

Cross-cultural empathy has been examined limitedly in the sales literature. The concept of cross-cultural empathy has been examined greatly in psychotherapy and counseling literature. Using Ridley and Lingle's (1996) definition, cross-cultural empathy could be defined in sales as the salesperson's ability and skill to identify and adapt to cultural differences between a salesperson and customer. This helps the salesperson to have an open attitude with the necessary knowledge and skill to work successfully across cultures. It involves a deepening of the human empathic response to permit a sense of mutuality and understanding across differences in value and expectation that cross-cultural interchange often involves.

Ibrahim (1991) identified the need to "convey empathy in a culturally consistent and meaningful manner" when working with culturally diverse groups. Sue, Yau, and Mao (1995) found that counselors' credibility with a client was influenced greatly if the counselor acknowledges the cultural differences between them. Since culture is multidimensional, Ridley and Lingle (1996) suggested that in order to communicate cultural empathy effectively to clients, in psychotherapy the counselor should simultaneously use perceptual, affective, and cognitive empathy. In psychotherapy literature, many studies have shown that if a counselor and client belong to the same ethnic group, they show a greater understanding of each other (Gim, Atkinson, and Kim, 1991; Lin, 1994; Lin, 1994). Although ethnic similarity is not a prerequisite to achieving cross-cultural empathy, the display of culturally sensitive responses and attitudes are essential to build cross-cultural empathy (D. Sue and Sundberg, 1996).

Asian Indians Acculturation to the U.S. Culture

Asian Indian immigrants have grown by a significant rate during the last decade. Before 1990, Asian immigrants accounted for 11% of all immigrants and between 1990 – 1994 it grew by 24% (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1994). Most of these immigrants do not encounter a big cultural shock or barriers in order to adapt to the U.S. culture. (Diwan & Jonnalagadda, 2001). Although on average Asian Indian (AI) immigrants have a higher social economical status compared to other immigrants, they are not a homogeneous group within AI communities. They have significant variations regarding their socio economic status, caste, religion, education levels, language, food habits and attitudes (Mogelongsky, 1995). Metha and Belk (1991) provided some insight about AIs living in the United States. They found that the second generation immigrants that are born in the U.S. were still integrating into the dominant culture rather than actually becoming a part of it.

On the other hand, immigrants who were born in their native countries were only partially integrated to the host country's culture. AIs who immigrated with a lower level of education (high school diploma or less) from a middle income class in India tend to have a lower fluency in English proficiency than the Indian immigrants who have a higher level of education (college degree or higher). This has a great influence on the acculturation process to the U.S. culture. Therefore, immigrants from a lower level of education have a harder time in acculturating to the U.S. culture (Diwan & Jonnalagadda, 2001).

- **First Generation Asian Indian**
First generation AIs are defined as Indians who migrated after reaching adulthood with an average age of 18 or over. The first generation AIs migrated to the U.S. seeking to establish a better life. The first generation AIs take a longer time and have more obstacles in acculturating to the U.S. culture (Raj and Silvaman 2003).

- **Second Generation Asian Indians**

The second generation AIs are defined as being born in the U.S. and whose parents are first generation Indians or those who migrated as a child accompanying their parents. The second generation AIs do not always classify themselves as a part of the AI community. They consider themselves to be different with a mix of east and west culture. The second generation AIs have adapted well to the Western culture.

Theoretical Framework

This study used symbolic interaction as the base theory. The theory claims that social participants in any social situation are constantly negotiating a shared definition of the situation. They take one another's viewpoints into account and interpret one another's behavior as they construct possible lines of interaction and select lines of action for implementation (Manis & Meltzer, 1978). Symbolic Interaction theory is based on three assumptions (Blumer 1969). The first assumption is that humans act on the basis of the meanings that things have for them which mean humans respond the attached meaning of things and act on the basis of meaning. Underlying this assumption is the presupposition that the individual human and the world exist separately, but individuals interpret the world through the use of symbols (language) in the process of interaction. Humans then act and communicate on the basis of the meaning that is derived from symbolic interaction.

Second assumption is focused on creating meaning during the process of interaction among individuals (Blumer 1969). An individual create meaning by admiring how others act to define things. Humans are able to create common meaning because individuals are able to agree on the meanings attached to things in their environment. The third assumption addresses the ever changing nature of meaning. Meanings are assigned and modified through an interpretive process that is ever changing, subject to redefinition, relocation and realignments (Blumer 1969). Humans have the cognitive capability for abstract and reflective thinking. This enables the development of the symbolic use of language and gestures for the creation and communication of meanings that produces a common response in interaction with others. This allows humans to place objects and events in time, create imaginary phenomena and learn without directly encountering the things to be learned. Therefore through selection and interpretation of stimuli, humans form new meanings and new ways to respond.

In Symbolic Interaction theory, the individual and the context in which the individual exist are inseparable. The nature of humans is best understood through individual interpretation of reality in a social context. The focus of research is on the nature of individual and collective social interaction. In order to understand individuals and collective social interactions, it is important to understand the meaning of a situation from the perspective of the individual and societal groups. The social world is created from interactions among humans therefore society consists of those individuals and their interactions within larger networks of other individuals and groups. Symbolic Interaction theory provides a theoretical foundation for studying how individuals interpret and create meaning from objects and other humans and how this process of interpretation leads to behavior in specific situations.

Methodology

This study used a phenomenological design. According to Patton (2002) phenomenological design provides the opportunity to understand social and psychological phenomena from the perspective of the people involved. Van Manen (1990) defined a phenomenological study as one that describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a particular concept (i.e., the phenomenon). In order to conduct a meaningful phenomenological study, Patton suggested four key steps that an investigator should follow. First, the phenomenological investigator must understand the philosophical perspectives behind the approach, especially certain preconceptions regarding the study. Secondly, the phenomenological investigator should develop research questions which investigate the meanings of individuals' lived experiences such that the subject can sufficiently describe their feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. Third, it is important that subjects of a phenomenological study be carefully selected for their ability to fully describe the phenomenon under investigation, based upon their having had real and lived experiences. Finally, phenomenological investigation requires rigorous data analysis which could help the investigator in understanding and deriving emergent themes.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited from Indian communities who were living in Cincinnati, Ohio and Columbus, Ohio metropolitan area. Researcher first contacted some community leaders and explained to them the purpose of the research. Through the community leaders the researcher was able to recruit participants for the study.

Face to face interviews were conducted with participants in a location of their choice. At the interview site, subjects were told about the study procedure, how confidentiality will be managed, and were given the opportunity to ask any questions. The interview contained both structured and unstructured questions so the researcher was able to extract views and opinions from participants. The participants were given the opportunity to discuss anything pertaining to the research framework. Each interview took approximately an hour and was audio taped for data analysis. None of the subjects objected for audio taping the interviews. The questions for the interview were formulated using previous studies done on cross-cultural empathy, relationship selling, and on acculturation.

Sample

A total of 52 face-to-face interviews were conducted. Twenty two interviews were conducted with first generation AIs and 30 interviews were conducted with second generation AIs. Out of the twenty two first generation AI participants, 12 were men and 10 were females. Of the thirty second generation AI participants, 16 were men and 14 were women. In order to participate in this study the individual or the household should have lived in the United States for more than 2 years and have migrated from any South Asian country. All subjects are assumed to have some interaction with a salesperson of a different ethnic group.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In qualitative research, data collection and data analysis is a simultaneous process. According to Creswell (2003), qualitative researchers identify and describe patterns from participants. The researcher then attempts to understand and explain these patterns and themes. In the current study, the researcher audio taped all the interviews and transcribed the interviews to paper format. The researcher then coded each transcript. Qualitative data analysis software package Nvivo Version 9 was used to analyze each transcript. Data analysis was a multi-step process, which include multiple forms of coding. First the researcher conducted open coding to find commonalities that reflected categories which focused on broader themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This was followed by axial coding which relate the initial broader themes to each other to form a basic framework for analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Next, theoretical coding was conducted which consists of integrating the textual data into the emerged conceptual framework (Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

Validity and Reliability

Consistency, reliability, dependability, and audit ability with regard to qualitative research is directly correlated with the degree of consistency between what has been researched and what is represented in the final text (Mantzoukas, 2004). Internal validity was constructed by spending significant time with each respondent in order to get to know them and to confirm the collected data was accurate. After the completion of primary coding, a marketing professor and a PhD student was utilized to confirm the coding which increased the validity of the coding process. After the completion of the data mining process, the findings were provided to a selected group of participants to confirm that the findings were accurately and correctly interpreted.

Results

Emergent Themes

Five key themes emerged emphasizing the importance of cross-cultural awareness and empathy; cultural and value similarities, language similarities (accent), level of comfort, trust, and helping behavior. When asked the question, "If you needed to purchase life insurance, would you prefer talking to a life insurance agent who is an Indian or non-Indian?" Out of the 22, first generation AI 19 of the participants confirmed that they would prefer talking with an AI salesperson.

Only 8 out of the 30 second generation AIs preferred talking to an AI life insurance agent. 16 of the second generation AIs mentioned that the salesperson ethnicity has no bearing on who they would talk to when purchasing life insurance. When asked to justify their response significantly different responses were obtained from first and second generation AIs.

- Theme 1: Importance of Cultural and Value Similarities

The majority of the first generation AI who migrated to the U.S. valued and appreciated their culture and hailed their cultural heritage. As a result of this, they were embedded in their cultural values and norms, and viewed western cultures as “different”. Therefore, they felt more comfortable communicating and doing business with people who had similar cultural values as they did so that they could relate well to each other. This was evident from the responses which were obtained from the participants: A forty two year old first generation AI participant: “my husband and I met an insurance salesperson recently. He was emphasizing the importance of retirement, retirement homes, and funeral arrangement costs...In our culture we don’t think about those things.. when we retire we go to our children, it is our children’s responsibility to take care of us when we get old, and it is their responsibility to have a respectable funeral for their parents. After all we worked hard to provide a good future for our children...”

A fifty one year old first generation AI male: “People here are in a rush... they want to make quick decisions and sales people always push you to buy this and buy that... I like to take my time and think when I buy something. It is important for me that the salesperson or any other person respect that.. I think an Indian salesperson would never rush another Indian person to buy...”Second generation AIs responses were different from the first generation AIs. Second generation AIs responses showed that they are not concerned about the ethnicity or the origin of the salesperson or the importance of Indian values and norms. They were more concerned about the salesperson knowledge, ability to identify customer needs, and product features. A twenty nine year old second generation AI: “I don’t really care about the ethnicity of the salesperson, whether he or she is white, black or brown. As long as the salesperson knows what he or she is talking about and is honest I am fine with whoever it is...”A twenty eight year old second generation AI: “Whether the salesperson is Indian or American, he needs to be aware of my requirements and needs. As long as the financial specialist can provide a policy to full fill my needs and requirements, I really don’t worry whether the salesperson is Indian or not... to be honest!”

- Theme 2: Communication Difficulties

Many first generation AIs highlighted that they have a communication barrier when communicating with American salespeople. It is important to understand that all the participants who were interviewed for the study were able to communicate in English very fluently. However, they all had a thick Indian accent. Many of the participants believed that non-Indian salespeople had a hard time understanding what they were communicating. This was highlighted by some of the responses which were recorded:

A thirty seven year old first generation AI: “.Of course the way we would pronounce words and the way Americans pronounce words are different.. it is a annoying when you have to repeat the same word multiple times when you talk...” Second generation AIs had a different perspective when it came to communication. Second generation AIs preferred using English to communicate compared to a native language. A twenty eight year old second generation AI: “... my parents and I came to the U.S when I was 5 years old. I am more fluent in English than in Hindi... although at home my parents talk in Hindi I talk in English...”

- Theme 3: Comfort Level

Generally the first generation AIs stated that they would feel more comfortable when they do business with an AI salesperson than a non-AI salesperson. This is because first generation AIs lived most of their lives in India and they felt comfortable conversing with people from that part of the world as they can speak in their native language and had similar interests such as sports, politics, and other social events. A forty one year old first generation AI: “...I think it would be easy to talk to an Indian because we have common interests, I could talk about cricket, politics, and many other things that would be mutually interesting...” A thirty four year old first generation AI: “... This goes along with what we talked about earlier with accent, an Indian person would understand me immediately and I wouldn’t need to repeat, which makes talking easier and more comfortable...”

This was drastically different to second generation AIs. They felt more comfortable doing business with American salespeople. This was mainly due to the fact that they were born or migrated to the U.S when they were very young and have adapted to the main stream U.S culture well. Second generation AIs were more biased towards the western culture. A twenty one year old second generation AI: "... I personally feel comfortable talking to a white salesperson than a Asian Indian salesperson. I don't know why.. maybe because all most all of my friends are America.." A twenty seven year old second generation AI: "I don't think it really matters. I am comfortable with any kind of a salesperson regardless where they come from... If I had to pick one I would go with an American salesperson because they are talk straight and to the point..."

- Theme 4: Trust

In sales trust is an important dimension. For first generation AIs trust is an important element in any form of interactions. First generation AIs felt that an Indian salesperson would always have their best interest in mind because he or she is an Indian. Therefore first generation AIs trusted an Indian salesperson more than they would trust a non-Indian salesperson. A forty six year old first generation AI: "...if the salesperson is Indian I feel they would be more honest especially with us since we are Indians too..." A fifty two year old first generation AI: "...anyone can manipulate information or lie to you specially salespeople...whether it is Indian salesperson or not.. however, Indians here are a very close net group and we know each other well. So if an Indian salesperson tricks you it is easy for us to catch him and he will not be welcomed!..." Second generation AIs had a difference perspective of trust. They had no preference with regard to the salesperson's ethnicity but they had a more open perspective of trust when it came to business relationships. A twenty four year old second generation AI: "... If you are not careful anyone can take advantage of you so it is your responsibility to use common sense and be alert when dealing with any person..."

- Theme 5: Helping Behavior

Both first and second generation AI preferred doing business with an Indian salesperson as they believed it was their responsibility to help each other. A forty three year old first generation AI: " If I had the chance to buy from two salespeople one Indian and the other non Indian I would buy from the Indian salesperson just because I want to help him out.." A fifty four year old first generation AI: "... we are thousand miles away from our country, so our country men should help each other...I would buy from a Indian salesperson because he is from India..." A twenty four year old second generation AI: "Although I am born in the U.S I have of an Indian origin...I would buy from an Indian salesperson if I that could help him or her out..."

Discussion and Implications

This study provides valuable insights to salespeople and sales managers when addressing the important question of cross-cultural marketing. The study findings showed that salespeople cannot categorize AI as one demographic unit as different generations have acculturated to the main stream U.S culture differently hence has different perceptions and needs.

Selling to First Generation AIs

When selling to AI customers it is important that salespeople understand that they have different needs and wants which are derived from their cultural values and norms. Therefore, it is pivotal that salespeople are well aware, knowledgeable and sensitive to those customers needs.

First generation AIs will only purchase if salespeople are able to provide appropriate recommendations for their specific needs. If salespeople are unable to show how their products or services would help solve customers' needs, customers would resist to purchase. When selling to first generation AIs, salespeople should be aware of their communication barrier. It is not to state that they are poor in their language skills, but first generation AIs have an accent that is unique and salespeople need to have more patience and pay close attention to what and how they communicate. AIs put a great emphasize on trust when purchasing from salespeople. For first generation AIs trust is cultivated through salespersons interactions. It was evident that first generation AIs are more likely to trust salespeople who can relate well to the them, therefore it is important that salespeople are aware and knowledgeable about AI culture, interests, and sports.

First generation AIs are very laid back and therefore they take more time when making decisions. Salespeople should be sensitive to this and provide them with more time to make purchasing decisions without using sales tactics to create a sense of urgency to close sales.

Selling to Second Generation AIs

Second generation AIs are very different when compared to first generation AIs. Second generation AIs were either born in the U.S or migrated to the U.S when they were very young children. Second generation AIs are well acculturated to the main stream U.S culture and they portray close similarities to U.S. consumers. It is important that salespeople understand whether an AI customer is a first generation AI or a second generation AI as they have very different purchasing behaviors and needs. Second generation AIs had no bias towards the ethnicity of the salesperson. They are more focused on the transaction attributes such as product features, benefits, and price when making a purchase rather than the ethnicity of the salesperson.

Another key finding was that the second generation AIs was more comfortable doing business with American salespeople compared to Indian salespeople. Second generation AIs trusted salespeople who were skilled, educated and had past experience in selling. Both first and second generation AIs agreed that they would purchase from Indian salespeople to help them achieve their sales goals. This is an important implication because the AI population in the U.S. is on the rise and compared to other ethnic groups AIs are educated and are wealthy (U.S Census 2010). Sales managers should consider hiring sales people of Indian origin to enhance and cultivate relationships with AI customers as they are more likely to purchase from Indian salespeople compared to non-Indian salespeople.

Limitations And Suggestions For Future Research

A key limitation of this study was that first generation AIs were older, on average, than the second generation AIs. Also, many of the first generation AIs were married, had families, and had more responsibilities than the second generation AIs. Therefore, the age difference had a significant impact on their level of exposure and maturity levels of each participant. India is a country with many religions, castes, and ethnic groups. However, the geographic origin of participants might have an influence on their cultural values. It would be interesting to explore the impact of the region of origin in India, religion, caste, and how these factors influence acculturation to the US and how they impact customer and salesperson interaction. It would be interesting to conduct a quantitative analysis using a relatively large sample to identify if there are other factors that influence customers-salesperson interaction and customer's purchase intention of Asian Indian immigrants and to confirm the themes derived from this study.

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