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## To succeed, learn the customer's language, customs

Ashley Nowe  
Freelance

By Ashley Nowe

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When **Breault** Research Organization, an international optical engineering firm, tried to enter the Japanese market with little knowledge of the culture, rejection was plentiful and results were rare.

Tucson-based **Breault** quickly concluded that language and cultural training was needed to succeed in the formal business world of Japan.

"We were interested in developing our business in Japan, but it's one of the most difficult markets to enter for cultural reasons ... especially from American and European standpoints," said John Schweyen, **Breault's** technical account manager for Japan. "We tried for five years and the results were not good."

After years of untouched potential, the company decided to train Schweyen in Japanese, first while he lived in the Bay Area and then at Bernard Language School, 931 N. Swan Road. The company sends him to Japan five months out of the year to work with a Japanese distributor.

"The more you know the language, the more you know the culture and the better you can address customer needs," Schweyen said. "They appreciate that type of commitment, especially from a small company like ours. It's an investment."

Schweyen said business in Japan has "grown by a factor of 10" since 1999, when he began working there.

As companies increasingly branch into global markets, the importance of understanding not only other languages, but also other cultures is becoming essential, said Mark Rubiner, administrative director and co-founder of the language school.

"In most cases you can get by speaking with just English, but when you speak the native language you are more likely to build the relationship," Rubiner said. "The better you understand language and culture, the more your business opportunities grow."

The National Optical Astronomy Observatories, overseer of Kitt Peak National Observatory along with other astronomy sites, also ran into language and cultural barriers before seeking help.

The nationally funded observatory has a site in Chile, and found scientists struggling to communicate with South American colleagues.

NOAO paid for employees to take Spanish classes, provided on-site, with the language school during lunch and toward the end of the work day.

"The nice thing about our experience was that the instructor was from South America, so she could convey cultural aspects and how to work with the culture," said Sandra Abbey, human resources manager for NOAO. "It was nice to have that and not just a class geared toward Mexico. We learned specifically how to interact with the South American culture."

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Diane Katz, owner of Harmony LLC, said understanding other cultures means doing research, talking with people who have traveled to the location and being an active observer while there. Harmony, at 4559 N. Paseo Bocoancos, is a training and teambuilding program.

"People must have the ability to acclimate to different customs rather than asking them to change to you," Katz said. "It is very important to be humble in someone else's home."

At the Viscount Suite Hotel, employees are taught to make foreign visitors feel welcome by communicating in the native language of the guest.

Rodney Short, the hotel's director of sales, said on-the-job training is used to teach employees to be culturally aware and adaptive.

"Almost everyone who works at the front desk at least knows the basics in Spanish, including etiquette," Short said. "The learning curve is quick here. It has to be or customers won't want to spend money with you."

The hotel has made other changes in recent years, catering more to the Hispanic culture.

Wilbur's Grill in the hotel now stays open late, because many Mexican families eat dinner late in the evening.

"The most important thing is to never be afraid," Katz said. "We have to be able to laugh at ourselves, look at our belief systems and most importantly never be afraid to ask."

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Cultural training

Research the culture before communicating

- \* Look online; speak with natives or others who recently traveled.

Keep an open mind and open eyes

- \* Don't assume anything about the culture.

- \* Look around to see how others act.

Be an active observer

- \* Don't be afraid to ask questions.

Try to communicate in customer's native language

- \* It's a sign of respect.

- \* It shows desire for business.

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Mark Rubiner, The Bernard Language Institute

Diane Katz, Harmony LLC

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