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B2B Salespeople's cultural souvenirs – Finns meeting Japanese

21.6.2021 — Arja Hautala



Culture is an exciting, yet abstract and a tricky concept. As salespeople, we bring our culture as a mental souvenir into interactions with buyers coming from other cultures. In fact, culture is a discreet and taken-for-granted mental companion for both sellers and buyers representing their own cultural backgrounds in shared business meetings. Genuine curiosity and appreciation for things Japanese as well as awareness of one's Finnish roots will help the Finnish salesperson to succeed with Japanese business professionals.

Coki – a community emphasizing stakeholder value

A Japanese community of SME (small and medium-sized) business owners called Coki (公器) organized a webinar on “Happiness and the ways of working and living in Finland” in May 2021. I had the privilege to be the keynote speaker for an audience of over 80 enthusiastic Japanese business professionals. These SME business owners are interested in networking with other Coki members and share an interest in promoting stakeholder value.

The Coki audience expressed a profound interest in the Finnish way of living and working. The amount of questions in the chatbox as well as later comments in the feedback survey revealed a genuine curiosity for the way of living and working in this remote Scandinavian

country. In my role of as the keynote speaker, I considered myself as a representative and ‘seller’ of Finland as a nation.

Adopting the salesperson’s viewpoint, every salesperson imperceptibly brings one’s own culture as a souvenir wherever one travels in person (soon, we hope) or remotely zooms. Funny customs or other cultural remarks offer good small talk material for sales meetings: How Finns drink the most coffee per capita in the world, how we have real spruce trees inside our houses during Christmas time, and children do not get any homework for their 10-week long summer holidays. On their behalf, Japanese people readily relate Moomins, Northern lights, Santa Claus, reindeer, snow and Marimekko to Finland.

People from other cultures may also observe and point at issues that may puzzle you for a long time. This also happened during the Coki webinar. Yes, Finland has been nominated the happiest country in the world for the 4th time in a row, but how come we Finns do not relate ourselves as the happiest people? I guess some of the stereotypical and rather traditional characteristics of Finnish people are seemingly not related to happiness, e.g. pessimism (‘Do not aim high because you will only hurt yourself when falling down’), tendency to withhold emotions (‘If you show too much happiness, other people may become jealous and may not think highly of you’) as well as feelings of loneliness coupled with dark and long winter days. Or maybe this discrepancy between measuring happiness and feeling happy highlights the fact that there is always a lot of heterogeneity even within ‘one culture’ and that cultures – as well as figures of speech relating to a particular culture – also change along generations.

Your implicit cultural heritage becoming explicit

Most of us do not pay any special attention to our own culture and values in our daily lives. Only when interacting with people from different cultures do we suddenly become aware that cultures are different. Suddenly the implicit and mundane aspects of culture become explicit and unique. The culture we live in defines us to some extent and offers inbuilt frames for our mindsets, ways of thinking and guides our expectations for interaction. This notion goes deeper than mere culturally-bound habits or customs, as some customs may be anchored in our values and moral.

Only when explaining one’s everyday settings to people from other countries, the mundane becomes pronounced. During the webinar, I took pride in showing a photo of the Finnish cabinet with five ministers – all female – as well as the cover of Time magazine (March 2021) with our 35-year-old prime minister on the cover. A mother of a 3-year-old from Finland has become the prime minister and can empower women around the world – and I have the privilege to share the news! I felt humbled when I noticed the female participants of the webinar to share posts on the topic on Facebook and LinkedIn.

However, the state of equality and willingness to change centuries-old ways to conduct business and life varies between countries. Good salespeople adapt to the customer’s national contexts even though it would mean to momentarily loosen up one’s own expectations and ways of doing things.

Omoiyari – an example of interpersonal expectations

Skillful salespeople are customer-oriented and strive to understand the state of things and opportunities from the customer's viewpoint. When doing business in Japan, the salesperson may want to widen this business-related orientation to cover all the interactional moments and topics between the salesperson and the customer; whether in hotel lobbies, taxis, restaurants, company offices, during plant visits and when engaging in business or small talk and in between the actual meetings.

In Japan, the salesperson shows *omoiyari* (思いやり), an extensive 'other-oriented mindset' as an ultimate form of customer-orientation. This type of altruistic anticipatory consideration and empathy for other people's needs, wishes and concerns is not only expected but also respected in Japanese culture, resulting in comfortable and relaxed interaction. When a salesperson shows a lot of *omoiyari*, they will be trusted. *Omoiyari* is only one selected example of behavior emphasized in the Japanese way of conducting business, but a particularly important one to acknowledge as it is related to trust building.

We can do it – Gambarimashou!

Even though a country with 0 mountains and over 3 million saunas may seem in many ways distant from a country with a 26-times bigger population with roughly 20.000 mountains, Finnish and Japanese people share similarities. From my perspective, both nationalities value punctuality, honesty and modesty, and enjoy the silence, simplicity and authenticity nature offers us. In addition, giving and keeping promises is an identical feature in both cultures. From the international business perspective, these cultural similarities also automatically offer solid building blocks for long-term business relationships.

In sum, the obvious culture-related products and customs are only the tip of the iceberg. Successful intercultural interaction requires not only to understand the basics of the other person's way of thinking but especially one's own.

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