

Research Note

Introducing *Omotenashi* to the World:

Challenges to Japanese Customer Service in a Cross-cultural Setting

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<Abstract>

This study uses the case of a Japanese fashion retailer (referred to by the pseudonym “Ichi”) in Hong Kong to explore how the company introduced *omotenashi* (Japanese hospitality) in a cross-cultural setting and the challenges faced during the process. *Omotenashi* was examined from the viewpoint of its two core cultural elements: *kata* (cultural pattern) and the host-guest relationship. This paper suggests that the company interpreted *kata* as a superficial aspect of *omotenashi*, which was incorporated in their manual aiming to motivate employees through an evaluation system. Local employees subject to the manual were performing the way the company expected to gain merits from the evaluation system. The challenges Ichi faced in Hong Kong mainly relate to identifying the best motivation mechanism for the company to find employees who serve customers in the desired manner. This paper offers suggestions for companies for improving their strategies based on *omotenashi*, as well as on their diverse cultural aspects.

<Keywords>

customer service, *omotenashi*, manual, standardization, cross-culture

I . Introduction

Customer service is regarded as one of the fundamental sources of value creation, which largely contributes to a company’s sustainable growth (Belal, Shirahada, and Kosaka, 2013). In a globalized market environment, companies are struggling to identify their strategic advantages and how these could be sustained without

compromising on unique value creation. While some companies devote a large amount of time and resources to expanding their research capacity, skills, and networks, other companies rely on the cultural practices of the company's country-of-origin to build their business strategies.

Japan has been regarded as a country with strong cultural traits, as far as corporate management and business operations are concerned. Japan's highly developed service industry is claimed to have largely benefited from its unique customer service policies (Vaziri et al., 2015). Huysveld (2016) points out the necessity for foreign counterparts to address Japanese clients by clearly understanding their mindset toward customer service. One of the traditional norms that is often claimed to be embedded in Japanese customer service is *omotenashi*, which translates to hospitality, entertainment, or service.

This study chooses a Japanese fashion retailer (referred to by the pseudonym "Ichi") in Hong Kong to analyze how the company incorporated the spirit of Japanese-style customer service, or *omotenashi*, into its system, and how this effort has faced challenges due to local employees, who were reluctant to practice it on site. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In section two, it will provide a brief literature review on Japanese-style service and *omotenashi*, with special emphasis on their historical development and usage in business practices. The methodology of this study is then presented in section three, and anticipated contributions are discussed before the case study in section four and five. In the last section, it provides concluding remarks.

II. Literature Review

The origin of *omotenashi* can be traced back to the tea ceremony (Hosoi, 2006; Yamaki, 2013), religion (Ichijo, 2015), the Bushido spirit (Takeda, 2013), and traditional banquets (Aishima and Sato, 2015). Among these studies, many point out that *kata* (cultural pattern) and host-guest relationship are the essential features of the *omotenashi* spirit. This study interprets *kata* as a way to serve customers and host-guest relationship as employee-customer relationship.

Kata, or cultural pattern, in this paper indicates the way Japanese are required or expected to behave, in particular from an external perspective. Yamaki (2013) points out the similarities between religious ceremonies and the tea ceremony, and explored how Japanese organizations tended to regiment human behaviors and language into particular *kata*. Ikeda (2012) also points out that the use of standardized manuals is a basic requirement for inculcating this belief. Some studies stress the uniqueness of the host-guest relationship in the Japanese context. Sato (2015) explains that hosts need to acquire the skills of anticipating the needs of guests, treating them as *kami-sama* (deities). Sato and Al-alsheikh (2014) add that *omotenashi* requires non-monetary motives, such as serving customers from the heart, which differs from the monetary rewards offered to service providers in the West.

The unique values of *omotenashi* were expected to contribute to the overseas business of Japanese companies. Developing a method to build a “Japanese-like” brand image, which could be realized by a Japanese-style customer service, has been regarded as a necessary strategy for Japanese retailers in overseas markets (Sakaguchi, 2010; Shimada, 2011). Some claimed that successful customer service experiences accumulated within an organization could be standardized to serve customers with excellence (Sugimoto, 2016). Research conducted by Hamakawa (2013) shows that more than 40% of Japanese entrepreneurs identified *omotenashi* as one of the major strategies for their businesses. It seems clear that many Japanese companies realized the importance of *omotenashi*.

In contrast with arguments that stressed the uniqueness or beauty of *omotenashi* and its economic benefits, some researchers expressed doubts on whether it was actually practiced in reality. A feature issue on the theory of Japan (*nihonron*) was published in November 2015 by Toyo Keizai, a Japanese book and magazine publisher, to critically discuss the revival of Japan’s appeal among tourists. One of the articles used several examples, provided by foreign residents in Japan, to argue how Japan was far behind in being a tourist-friendly country. Interviewees complained that the Japanese were not practicing *omotenashi* because they were not thinking from the customers’ perspective, and much of their behavior was strictly in accordance with

manuals (Nakagawa, 2015). Some interviewees warned that *omotenashi* was based on the idea of Japanese being superior to other ethnic groups (Brasor, 2015).

Based on the case study of Ichi, a Japanese fashion retailer in Hong Kong, this paper aims to provide ethnographical answers to the following research questions. How has the idea of *omotenashi*, in particular its *kata* and host-guest relationship, been incorporated in the multinational company? How do local employees interpret and practice it on site? What are the challenges and possible solutions? Through answers to these questions, this paper aims to clarify the *real* application of *omotenashi* in the modern retail sector, which focuses on selling cheap goods in large quantities, in contrast with conventional research on *omotenashi*, focused on the hospitality industry (airlines, hotels, etc.).

III. Methodology

This paper uses data based on one year and a half of participant observation at several Ichi's Hong Kong retail stores, from 2009. Most data are obtained from direct observation, or refer to particular interviews. The analysis largely focuses on descriptions of events, as the author encountered at the stores, a procedure that Geertz (1973) describes as "thick description." Such description, which allows us to identify the connections between unrelated aspects, uses data to understand the general dynamics at work, and differentiates fieldwork-based research from the work of scholars in management schools, especially in terms of data analysis.

This paper will use a pseudonym for the informants and refrain from citing any first- and second-hand sources in order to avoid the identification of the company. The methodology of this paper allows the author to access the inner side of the organization, which often deals with sensitive information. Moreover, most of the narratives in this study cannot be referred to an exact date because they were obtained through daily conversations at the stores.

The case description starts with the introduction of Ichi's business operations in Hong Kong, acknowledging the implementation of *omotenashi* in its customer service as a brand strategy. This paper, then, further examines how the company aims to

disseminate its unique service style through a manualization process and how locals react to it.

IV. Case study

4.1 Ichi in Hong Kong and *omotenashi*

Introducing a global strategy was an unavoidable, but challenging, task for Ichi to become a *truly* global company. Ichi operated in more than 15 countries, and its overseas operations grew rapidly, with an increase of 46% in net sales and 31.6% in operational profits in the fiscal year 2015. One of the global strategies of Ichi was to use *omotenashi* as a tool for building its unique brand. It started business as a regional and domestic company, and did not pay much attention to the importance of the culture they had cultivated in Japan before going overseas.

Ichi's overseas operations and global strategy changed after its huge success in Hong Kong in 2005. Before its entry in Hong Kong, it failed to gain remarkable financial results in the United Kingdom and Mainland China— two markets that the company had entered at that time. The company was challenged by the unsatisfactory results it had achieved there, given its huge success in Japan. Ichi's success in Hong Kong was a surprise for many Ichi executives, who did not expect the company to receive such positive attention and financial results. The person in charge of the Hong Kong operations in 2005 believed that the full expression and usage of the image of Japan was one of the keys to this success. When Ichi entered the Hong Kong market, local stores sold exactly the same range of products as in Japan, without changing the language used for the packaging or tags, and preserved the Japanese-style customer service, based on the values of *omotenashi*.

After their successful experience in Hong Kong, Ichi analyzed the causes of its failure in the United Kingdom and Mainland China, and concluded it to be the over-localization of the system and underestimation of its strong potential as a Japanese company. From 2008, the company started to create and implement a series of global policies, centered on the idea of standardizing the advantages of “Japaneseness.” A Japanese manager who worked in Hong Kong stressed the

importance of “Japaneseness” in Ichi’s overseas business operations. According to an interview with the Japanese manager, released on September 25, 2010:

“... We failed to send the message about the goodness of Japanese companies (in UK), and what we could offer as a Japanese organization. At the time, customers only regarded us as an Asian company that sold affordable products. In the beginning, some customers might have been interested in our company, but we failed to differentiate ourselves. Then, we introduced them to our strengths, what we achieved as a Japanese company, and the fundamental principles that led to our success. Those are the major reasons for our success in Hong Kong and Korea. ... We need to show our high value through our attitudes towards work and display the company’s DNA to customers; otherwise, we will not differentiate our company from others.”

Among the global policies initiated by Ichi, such as standardizing the stock management system, changing the store layout, and introducing a written management philosophy, this study focuses on the company’s customer service policies. Ichi believes that *omotenashi* provides a high level of customer service to satisfy customers and stimulate their shopping attitude, as it has held true in Hong Kong, according to the company. In order to disseminate *omotenashi* across cultures, Ichi created a unified manual and a system aimed at educating and managing customer service among employees.

The next section will introduce examples of Ichi’s training and evaluation systems to illustrate the way the company emphasizes the concept of *omotenashi*, starting from its external performance, or *kata*.

4.2 Institutional control for realizing *omotenashi* practices

Ichi created an original customer service manual at its Japanese headquarters and introduced it to the overseas Ichi stores with only minor revisions. Ichi's customer service manual aimed to create an environment where customers felt comfortable and to create a unique brand image. The customer service manual has more than one hundred pages and its contents include the description of the Ichi-style appearance, including facial expressions, language usage, prohibited behavior, and so on.

The most important way for Ichi to disseminate *omotenashi* in the local stores was a one-day intensive training and daily routines. The one-day intensive training started with a DVD session, in which employees watched a video clip of a female salesperson's daily work, to learn the "correct" and "right" ways to serve customers. Trainees were expected to discuss, for instance, how employees could make customers more comfortable by smiling at them, how they could anticipate customers' potential needs by helping them search for other sizes, and how they could stimulate their buying attitude by providing them with shopping baskets.

The afternoon session of the one-day training was for employees to learn customer service by practice. Part-time employees were asked to stand face-to-face and greet each other using words such as "Welcome to the store" in Cantonese, with a "smile" on their face. At first, many part-time employees felt uncomfortable practicing this because they were not accustomed to smiling at unfamiliar people; however, they started to get used to it or even enjoyed it after a few hours of practice. At the end of the training, trainees were divided into groups and introduced to a competition for selecting the best group, whose practices best matched Ichi's brand image.

After trainees started working at the stores, where they would learn through daily routines, they participated to a daily briefing session, before work. Let us consider the way of speaking, for a moment. During a daily briefing session, all employees were required to chant "Six Magic Words¹," the six basic phrases that employees had to use when interacting with customers, to offer a standard customer service, along with a friendly and polite image. The manager randomly selected one employee, normally a part-time employee, to lead the chant. When employees failed to memorize all six phrases after several practice sessions, store managers would take action, such as

asking employees to write down those phrases until they were memorized. The company expected that repeating these phrases every day would make them seem more natural to employees and would contribute to unifying store employees.

The one-day training and daily routines at the stores demonstrated the company's strong focus on educating on the proper way of performing customer service rather than educating employees on how to cultivate the relationship with the customer and serve customers from the heart. Besides the trainings, Ichi used its evaluation systems to facilitate this process.

The second way for Ichi to implement *omotenashi* into daily practices was through its evaluation system. The customer service manual was the base for many evaluation criteria, which offered an explanation for expected employee behavior, with various examples. Ichi's evaluation systems for customer service aimed to check if employees served customers as per company expectations. The check sheet Ichi used to check on employees allowed evaluators to rank employees' performance on four levels, from A (the best) to D (the worst), based on their total scores on the check sheet.

There were two types of evaluations—by internal or external evaluators. Internal evaluators included managers, store managers, area managers, and headquarter executives, who evaluated employees mainly based on the customer service check sheet. External evaluators were customers and mystery shoppers. Customers could get a questionnaire at the store or evaluate employees online, and most evaluation criteria for these questionnaires were simpler compared to the check sheet used by the internal evaluators. Mystery shoppers, whose evaluations were based on the customer service check sheet, observed employees first and then gave an evaluation, reporting the results to the store manager. Later, their reports would be sent directly to the Hong Kong headquarters. The results of these internal and external evaluations significantly influenced employees' standing in the company, and lower results sometimes led to demotions.

There were two distinct features of Ichi's evaluation system, with respect to *omotenashi*. Firstly, evaluators had to largely rely on their instant judgments, meaning that employees' evaluations are mostly based on performance in that exact moment.

Most evaluators could only briefly deal with employees because of their tight schedule and workload. Secondly, Ichi's evaluation system prompted evaluators to focus more on the employees' superficial or external performance. Evaluators could give judgments instantly because Ichi's evaluation criteria, largely focused on *kata* (greetings, smiles, politeness in the use of language, and passing shopping baskets), were easier to judge, even when the evaluator visited the store for the first time, and this was expected to keep the results objective. It would be hard to evaluate how employees understood customers' needs in advance and satisfied them toward the end of the purchase behavior cycle, because such cases would require a detailed observation of the whole process. These features prompted employees to focus on their external performance, to deliver better customer service in superficial ways, as per the manual, in order to achieve a better outcome when the evaluators "took a glance" at their performance.

In other words, Ichi emphasized *kata*, or the external aspect of its customer service, through its training and evaluation system, rather than developing internal training, such as thinking from the customers' perspective. This suggests that Ichi, in fact, required employees to simply follow the manual, so that their behavior, and even thoughts, could be standardized. The next section will introduce the story of TK store to illustrate how Ichi's customer service has been actually interpreted and practiced.

4.3 *Omotenashi* by local employees

TK store was the second store with the longest association with Ichi in Hong Kong. It was opened in 2006 and was located in a local shopping mall of the Hong Kong Island, where many subsidiaries of Japanese companies are located. There were around 50 to 80 employees at the store, depending on the season, and around 70% of them were part-timers. Every employee worked in three different shifts, while managers were mainly working on morning or night shift, for opening and closing the store. All full-timers were, in general, required to work five days a week, eight hours a day, while part-timers, who were mostly college students, worked in different shifts. The TK store was not an exceptional case, but rather a representative case in Hong Kong. Data for

this section were obtained through daily conversations and observations at the store for around four months, from 2010 to 2011.

At that time, the TK store was led by the first female store manager with a bachelor's degree, Fiona. The store was well known among Ichi's Hong Kong stores for its high level of customer service and growing net sales. These achievements built on the special identity of store employees at the TK store, whose goals were to satisfy the company's requirements to achieve their career goals, such as promotion and relocation. Many employees, including part-timers, felt proud in their store and tended to differentiate themselves from employees of other stores, which were evaluated lower on customer service and on sales.

An unexpected update was received at the end of October 2011, when a mystery shopper gave the store the lowest score since its opening through a customer service evaluation. It was the first time that the TK store received a bad customer service evaluation since Fiona had become the store manager, and she knew that she needed to take immediate action rather than simply "perform" the Ichi's way of customer service for the evaluators, as many other senior managers did. Therefore, she organized a formal store meeting in mid-November, in a back room, where around twenty employees gathered to identify the reasons behind this low evaluation and improve their practices. Based on the mystery shopper's report, managers identified three causes: the absence of employee greetings at the store entrance, the "unfriendly" way in which employees looked at customers, and failure to use the "Six Magic Words." During the store meeting, some employees discussed whether the mystery shopper's evaluation followed the manual in a strict manner. Here is the conversation among Fiona and two full-time salespersons, Thomas and Ivy. The conversation started with a question raised by Thomas to Fiona about the comment made by the mystery shopper in the report (participant observation, mid-November 2015):

Thomas: "The mystery shopper said that an employee did not close the door in the fitting room. What is that supposed to mean? I have never heard about this rule before."

Fiona: “I have already argued or, more specifically, quarreled about this with the Hong Kong headquarter managers. Most mystery shoppers are from Mainland China, and they do not know the differences between the operations here and in Mainland China. Store employees are required to close the door for customers in Mainland China, but no such requirement exists here. Maybe we have to show how we care about customers by saying, “Please mind your hands” or something like that.”

Ivy: “We need to specify, ‘Please do not let your hands get caught in the fitting room door!’”

(Everyone laughed at Ivy’s comment)

The above conversation not only showed the difficulties of introducing a standard customer service manual across markets, but also revealed how the mystery shopper evaluated employees based on the standard manual and employees’ external performance.

Fiona felt the urgency to change this situation because she was worried that the lower evaluation on the customer service at the TK store would eventually negatively influence her evaluation for a future promotion. She had to gain a better score in every aspect to retain a good impression with the top management. Fiona clearly understood the importance of her subordinates in realizing her goal. During the meeting, she encouraged the employees and asked them what they thought the next goal of the store should be. A full-time employee said, “To get the best evaluation back!” Others showed their agreement by nodding, and their determination became more solid than before. Employees discussed how they could get a better score and found that performing well at the entrance was the key. Yuki, a full-time employee, suggested that, no matter what the employees were doing, they had to pay close attention to the entrance, to greet customers immediately when they entered the store. She added that all employees must echo the others’ greetings, even if they could not actually see the customer.

Employees had various thoughts on their minds and waited for the opportunity to restore their former high customer service score.

Several days after the internal meeting, a mystery shopper visited the store anonymously. Fiona spotted the mystery shopper as one who was clearly not shopping, but following her and watching her movements from a distance. Fiona immediately took action, and pretending to talk on the phone, she used the walkie-talkie to alert all employees. Fiona did not have to instruct the employees on what to do because most of them were trained to deal with this situation every day, ever since the store had received a lower evaluation. When employees heard her voice on the walkie-talkie, they started to smile, greet customers loudly, and actively interact with them, superficially demonstrating their capability of performing the way Ichi expected.

The efforts of the TK store employees paid off the next month, when the store got a much better score. The mystery shopper identified several employees who deserved higher evaluation and Fiona was praised as the best performer. After the result came out, Fiona expressed her gratitude on the cooperation and hard work of every employee. She was relieved by the positive result, but also felt guilty about “cheating” the mystery shopper for a better evaluation, although she knew that this was the only way for the store to improve its evaluation.

The case of the TK store shows that, even if employees did not quite understand some of the descriptions reported in the customer service manual, most of them were trying to satisfy the requirements of Ichi to achieve their own goals, such as sustaining the pride of the TK store and ensuring future promotions. The lack of sufficient time for the evaluation by the external examiner also prompted employees to mainly focus on their external performance.

V. Discussion

This paper examines the implementation of *omotenashi* in a cross-cultural setting. Previous studies indicate that *omotenashi*, which has been claimed to be the core of Japanese customer service, has two features: *kata* (cultural patterns) and host-guest relationship. *Kata* relates to how people should behave in a particular situation. In

addition, the host-guest relationship requires hosts to serve guests from the heart and treat them as *kami-sama* (deities).

The case of a Japanese fashion retailer, Ichi, in Hong Kong indicates that the company's *omotenashi* only focused on the external performance of Japanese-style customer service, such as the correct way of dressing, way of speaking, proper way to interact with customers, etc. The company had a strong tendency to train employees on the *kata* of its customer service, facilitating this process through its evaluation system. As a result, employees merely followed the manual and performed in a superficial way, as proven by the case study of one of Ichi's Hong Kong stores— the TK store. The example of the TK store showed how local employees struggled, but found ways to adapt to the manual, to successfully achieve their goals by sharing their accumulated knowledge of Ichi's customer service evaluation techniques, including its concepts of superficiality and instant evaluation. Hong Kong's special circumstance, such as the lack of sufficient checkup time by both internal and external evaluators, also facilitated the superficial reorganization of the Japanese-style customer service.

The hidden logic of Ichi's practice has close linkages with its business goals. The major concern for the company is to sell its products fast, efficiently, with profit, and they support the creation of a Japanese-style customer service based on its manual, which only focuses on employees' superficial performance. Ichi had less intention to train employees to cultivate the value of another core element of *omotenashi*— the host-guest relationship, which was, from their perspective, a time consuming task. The idea of Ichi shows that, in some cultural settings, the meaning of *omotenashi* is different from the traditional concept, which usually referred to the Japanese hospitality industry, where the service itself is the significant aim of the business.

VI. Conclusion

This study analyzed how Ichi, a Japanese fashion retailer, attempted to incorporate Japanese hospitality, the *omotenashi* spirit, in its customer service, and disseminated it in a cross-cultural setting in Hong Kong. This study analyzed *omotenashi* from two viewpoints, *kata* (cultural pattern) and the host-guest

relationship, and examined how these two components were treated in the case of Ichi. The analysis on Ichi's customer service manual and evaluation system suggested that the company placed emphasis on *kata*, or, more specifically, on superficial performance. Hong Kong's local situation enhanced employees' superficial performance, creating a situation where they performed in the best way possible to get the attention of their evaluators, who provided instant evaluations, due to lack of time.

It seemed that Ichi was on its way to recreate Japanese-style customer service in Hong Kong; however, the mechanism that motivated employees to realize this goal following the manual, pursuing short-term interests, in view of the regular inspections, was not sustainable. Moreover, employees were not trained to think and behave from the customers' perspectives, and thus they would not contribute to improve the shopping environment at the store. One of the most important programs for a company like Ichi would be to offer employees sufficient intensive and on-the-job training, so that employees could gradually understand, believe, and share the company goals. The company would also need trainers who clearly understand the aims and practices of the company. This type of education might take longer to show some results; however, as long as employees share a similar idea with the management side, the probability of producing positive long-term results increases.

In contrast, if Japanese companies do not aim to recreate the Japanese-style customer service overseas, they might consider creating a localized set of customer service manuals. Every culture has its own, unique, way to define hospitality, which, in the case of Hong Kong, is different from what Japanese customers would expect in Japan. For some customers, speed is the most important element during shopping, while others, such as tourists from Mainland China, expect the service to take care of their baggage. Even though a manual is localized, it does not mean that the company loses its core belief: host-guest relationship. Therefore, it is necessary for these companies to take into account how locals interpret hospitality, to find the best fit.

This study also suggests a redefinition of *omotenashi* according to the unique local context. *Omotenashi* in Ichi's Hong Kong stores exhibited the features of superficial and fixed, manual-based, practices, which differed from the way *omotenashi* has been

idealized in the context of traditional Japanese hospitality. The overemphasis of the economic effects of *omotenashi* in the recent years should be carefully examined. In other words, there should be no “best way” for the corporate management, because every company should determine its strategies based on its historical development and core principles, rather than blindly follow current “trends.”

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<Endnotes>

- ¹ They include, with direct translation from Cantonese, “Welcome to the store,” “I understand,” “Please wait a moment,” “Sorry to keep you waiting,” “Thank you very much,” and “Please come again.”

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