

TIPS FOR WELCOMING INTERNATIONAL VISITORS

International visitors are an important tourism market segment and represent a tremendous economic benefit to our communities, often spending double what the domestic visitor spends and staying longer. However, before they arrive, we must become prepared to serve them in a way which will make them feel welcome and will make them want to return as well as spread the word that we are indeed an "internationally-ready" destination. The following tips will help you prepare for these important guests.

1. Many cultures display more formality than ours, especially in the use of names. Avoid calling these guests by their first names unless invited to do so and use titles (Mr./Mrs., Doctor, Professor, etc.) with their surnames. When unsure which name is their surname, simply ask.
2. Be prepared for many cash transactions with international guests, as they may not use credit cards, and realize they may be surprised to see tax added at the register to the listed price.
3. Tipping is not a universal practice. Make your staff aware why tipping may not be practiced by our international guests. Also provide tasteful guidelines about tipping which may help the guests better handle our tipping custom.
4. Many international visitors smoke and may do so even in non-smoking areas because they are not accustomed to smoking restrictions. Kindly make them aware of the policy, and escort them to a pleasant place where they may smoke.
5. Show interest in your guests by engaging them in conversation. Good topics to bring up include questions or comments about their culture or sports, their experiences in our country or your experience in theirs. Money, politics, religion, ethnic jokes, family matters, and private opinions are usually subjects to avoid unless brought up by the guest.
6. Refer to these visitors as "international guests" rather than "foreigners" as the word may sound derogatory to them.
7. Make sure your staff is familiar with the AT&T Language Line, an excellent way to access interpreters for over 140 languages 24 hours a day. The number is 1-800-528-5888.
8. Examine your stereotypes and attitudes about various cultures to determine if those may have negative effects on the service you offer them. Realize our impressions are generalizations and people from any one country vary as we do

in our country. Make it your hospitality style to treat ALL guests with a high level of kindness and service, no matter where they come from.

9. Become familiar with the dining customs of your major international visitor markets and try to accommodate their desires and customs as much as possible.

10. Gift-giving occurs frequently in some cultures. It is important to choose not only an appropriate object but, an appropriate way of presenting the gift to the receiver.

Some resources for learning the customs and etiquette of various cultures include:

- Axtell, Roger E. Do's and Taboos of Hosting International Visitors. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1990.
- Culturgram Series: Available for over 181 areas of the world. Axiom Press 800- 528-6279.
- Morrison, Terri, Wayne E. Conaway, George A. Borden. Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands. Holbrook, MA: Bob Adams Inc., 1994.

Note: It is important to be aware of where differences may arise when serving international guests and how best to handle these situations, but most importantly . . . enjoy the opportunity and look for the similarities between us as well!

MORE TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH INTERNATIONAL GUESTS

We often don't speak the same language as our international guests, but we will still be able to communicate using these tools.

1. If speaking to a guest with limited English ability, use active listening. Simply repeat back what you understood them to say and invite them to repeat back what you have said. That is the best way to know if you have understood one another.

2. Write things down, especially directions, special menu items, prices, instructions and numbers. Many international guests can read much more English than they speak or understand verbally.

3. Speak slower, not louder, and enunciate clearly. Choose simple words and simple sentence structures, and avoid using slang, idioms, or expressions with which an international visitor may not be familiar.

4. When giving directions to an international guest, always use a map, cite landmarks and use "right/left" rather than "east/west/north/south." Avoid giving directions in distances (yards, miles, etc.) as they may be more familiar with the metric system.

5. On the telephone it is important to use standard greetings and farewells ("Hello" and "Good-bye" rather than "Hi, there," "How are ya?," "See ya," or "Bye-bye.") Keep your voice level up through the end of the sentence and try spelling important words if you are having difficulty communicating.

6. Body language can be a useful tool in communicating, but can also be misinterpreted among cultures. Some important considerations are:

a) People of other cultures may have a different "comfort zone" than we do. Try to adjust to the distance they are comfortable with when conversing.

b) Try to minimize hand gestures as some of our commonly used gestures may have negative connotations in other cultures.

c) In general, it is best to avoid physically touching international guests as it may be forbidden or perceived as too aggressive in some cultures.

d) Keep in mind that not all cultures use direct eye contact as it may be considered intrusive and disrespectful to them. Try to mirror the degree of eye contact they give you in order to keep them comfortable.

e) The handshake has many variations among cultures. Wait to see if the international visitor extends his/her hand, and if so, try to match the pressure and length of the handshake given to you. Finally, sometimes when we are face-to-face with an international guest, the "fear factor" takes over and makes communication even more difficult. So, RELAX, LISTEN, and EXPECT to understand.

SPECIAL SERVICE CONSIDERATIONS TO MAKE THE INTERNATIONAL GUEST FEEL MORE WELCOME

The following are suggestions from international visitors to our country when asked what makes them feel more at home and well served:

1. Keep an updated record of employees who speak international languages and use those valuable resources to help guests. Provide bilingual dictionaries of major languages to aid in communication.

2. Use international signage whenever possible such as for restrooms, telephones, smoking, etc.

3. Provide currency exchange or have written directions to the nearest exchange.

4. Offer items in rooms such as tea/coffeemakers and robes and slippers. Have voltage converters and hairdryers available and offer a two-bed room if available.
5. In hotels, translate safety warnings, telephone and pay-TV instructions into the major international languages. A welcome letter from the GM in their language is appreciated.
6. In hotels, be flexible with early arrivals/late departures because of international flight schedules.
7. In shops, have clothing and shoe size conversion charts available.
8. In restaurants, allow the guests to enjoy a relaxed meal by not picking up the plates too quickly and not bringing the check before they ask for it.
9. Remember that ice is not always preferred in drinks, so ask before adding ice. Ask if mineral water is preferred to tap water. Be aware that coffee is usually drunk stronger than we drink it. Espresso is often requested and "decaf" is rarely drunk by international guests.
10. As meal courses may be eaten in a different order, especially salad, always ask what order they would like those served.
11. If arranging sightseeing for international visitors, realize some may enjoy a funny, anecdotal tour with much free time while others may want a very structured tour filled with straight facts about the sights. Remember, humor may not translate well into other languages.
12. International visitors tend to rely more on public transportation than domestic visitors, so have easy-to-read maps and schedules available and know which companies offer city tours and day trips.

These services will be appreciated and will help make the visitor's stay more enjoyable, but remember . . . "The Best Surprise Is No Surprise!"

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