

# Top Ten Japanese Service Culture Attributes



So, everyone knows that Japanese service rocks. Magazines like Monocle fetishize Japanese retail brands as the best in the world. Indeed it has been widely reported that the Japanese concept of omotenashi or hospitality was a key element behind Tokyo's victory in the 2020 Olympic bid. But what distinguishes Japanese service culture from other service cultures around the world and what are its key attributes?

Drawing on my experience of visiting Japan since 2000 and on my countless interactions with Japanese workers at hotels, malls, on the excellent transport system and in shops and restaurants up and down the tiers from family restaurant up to kaiseki ryori, here are my Top Ten observations on what makes Japan so superlative and special.

## 1. Performance

There is often a flourish to Japanese service culture. If you go for teriyaki, o-konomi-yaki or to the best sushi restaurants, you'll be able to see the food prepared in front of you. Mannerisms are polished and executed with precision for even the most mundane of tasks. Station attendants, for example, have this way of swiping their hand in the direction of the train as it leaves the station. I don't know if it makes the perfectly punctual trains move any faster, but it certainly gives me confidence that Japan Railways and Tokyo Metro are well run organisations with highly motivated employees.

## 2. Commitment

It seems that there is no such thing as looking uninterested, being blasé or moping just because you are having a bad day. A TV programme like the British sitcom Phone Shop simply wouldn't work in Japan because Slacktivism is less counter cultural than simply anti-Japanese. Yes, there is a freeter phenomenon of part time workers, but this is about convenience and flexible working hours and certainly not taken as an excuse for poor service. Even the littlest request seems to be taken as a mission of the highest significance in Japan. The most disgusting eater leaving a ramen shop can expect vehement bowing on his or her departure!

This is most palpable when, for reasons out of control of the clerk or service worker, they are unable to satisfy your request. Then you may see a short cocked side nod, sharp intake of air and a pained look followed by the most sorrowful sounding murmuring. This is designed to convey the idea that they feel the pain as much as you and this look of anguished contrition will probably last until you leave the vicinity, when a beaming smile is then made ready for the next customer.

## 3. Perseverance

Good service is a duty. If you ask for something, for example, at a bookshop, if the item is not immediately available for some reason, the

# Top Ten Japanese Service Culture Attributes



person will ask you to wait and then scurry off into a back room or to consult a colleague. They'll generally come back with an answer before too long. Similarly, at a hotel if the front desk does not know the answer or cannot satisfy my request they'll keep trying. Then later on, having completely forgotten about my request I might be surprised by a beautifully written note on my bed or a plastic folder with the information requested slipped under the door while I was out.

"Leave no customer behind" seems to be the general motto here.

## 4. Dexterity

You might imagine many working in the Japanese service industry might be conjurers or surgeons in their spare time. You will never see Japanese waiters knock things over. The height of Japanese dexterity however is shown when they are counting money. This is done in a signature fashion by holding the notes taut and flicking the loose ends from one hand to the other with a satisfying thwack. If you pay for a hotel bill or a Shinkansen ticket you'll often see this. Less spectacular but just as impressive

in my book is the softness of mannerism. This is particularly so when putting down plates of food, or handing out a bill or a receipt to the customer. It is never rushed, never brusque or sudden. It's always very precise, measured and seems almost cushioned and hydraulic like the flush opening mechanism of a top end sound system.

## 5. Ushering

Service industry workers in Japan love to usher guests with their palms and a smile. It is not good enough to point and the use of the index finger would probably, in and of itself, be considered rude. The outstretched hand is used as a way to usher customers in the right direction. I find that annaijou or information kiosk receptionists are the aces at this manoeuvre - part of the softness of interface mentioned below.

## 6. Welcoming

The word Omotenashi has become a bit of a buzzword lately in Japan. It is loosely what is described as hospitality

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and is now even prized as a soft power asset. It is reputed to have been one of the main prongs of the Japanese offensive against the IOC to capture the 2020 Olympics. 'Irrashimase' is the universal refrain you will hear whenever you enter any restaurant. It is to be translated roughly as "you have arrived" but serves as an enthusiastic vow to serve with conviction. By the time you've spent any time in Japan it becomes like morning birdsong, you hardly notice it, but it is a very special to be treated like a VIP even if you're just buying noodles!

One service placard I read at the Tokyu Hotel I was

# Top Ten Japanese Service Culture Attributes



staying at in Ginza Tsukiji read (rough translation): "We strive to provide heart warming service for every customer we have the pleasure of associating with". Indeed.

## 7. Softness

This is about the interface between service worker and customer. Just as being able to 'read the air' in social situations and do the appropriate thing is prized in Japan, this is particularly true of service culture. The way the doors open in the taxis, the way the super fast Shinkansen bullet train gently pulls into the station with each door of each carriage perfectly matched to a berth on the platform and to the second advertised, when it is meant to... The way the bullet train accelerates smoothly and surreptitiously with barely a murmur of the engine is all about softness. Then there is cabin crew. Just compare the Japanese and Western stewardesses on Virgin. No comparison.

## 8. Feedback

"You've given me 1000 yen, it costs 350 yen, I am now giving you 650 yen change". This sort of exchange goes on all the time up and down Japan. You'd be considered a moron in the UK if after every time someone gave you change they said, "you've given me £5." I know I have you idiot, it's obvious, why say it?!" But in Japan this vocalisation is the sonic attunement that helps let service workers let you know that they take you seriously and are doing their best to serve you to the best of their ability. One phrase that I learned on this trip is the construction *kashi komarimashita* which is loosely translated as "roger that", or more obsequiously, "your wish is my command".

## 9. Fastidious

Of course there's the packaging. The littlest blemish on packaging and you can take it back and get a replacement with no questions asked; even if the merchandise inside is next to perfect.

Damage is also taken very seriously. When I took my JAL internal flight I was asked to sign a docket recording what damage was already on my suitcase so any damage they caused could be assessed. If you've ever wanted directions and had anyone draw you a map in Japan you'll find things underlined and everything shown in great detail. They'll often use legends and sometimes even colour coding for good measure. Which is just as well because street signposting is mostly a nightmare! There is also the phenomenon of *o-kodowari* which is the unique quirk or foible that craftspeople have of making something a certain unique way or serving a speciality in a particular way. For example extra roasting of a vegetable or a special way of garnishing it. Each establishment will be very proud of their kodowari because it shows the added value and their passion in sticking to their own philosophy.

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# Top Ten Japanese Service Culture Attributes



## 10. Humility

In the UK often you can be treated differently in a service context depending on your appearance or perceived social class. This is something that does not really happen in Japan as far I can see. Politeness, correct etiquette and solicitude are extended to everyone, whether they are Japanese or foreign regardless of their background. Everyone is considered as *o-kyaku-sama* – or honourable clientele and is addressed and treated as such. There is no buddy, mate or sir, no false familiarity or sly chumminess, There is quite a uniform formality to things. This may seem robotic but it is very democratic and shows that everyone is worthy of being given excellent service regardless of wealth, nationality or class. Another of the great things about Japan.

So overall, having reviewed their service culture I think Japan is probably in pretty good shape to host the 2020 Olympics. The main issues with Tokyo are street signage and the complexity of the transport system for foreign visitors. What is needed is a user friendly signage overlay which semiotics and service design could help with to ensure everyone knows where they are going. I think many Japanese taxi drivers compare poorly with London cabbies for instance in terms of their knowledge of the city and of course, few of them speak any English. Training will need to be given to ensure that they don't take people to Yokohama for the sailing when they should be up in Ueno Park for the archery! I am sure however that an army of helpful and super friendly volunteers will be on hand in summer 2020 to ensure that people make the most of their visit. The only thing to worry about will be the weather. Tokyo in July can be more than just a tad humid!



Chris Arning specialises in helping companies with their brand strategy and communications through a technique called semiotics.

He can be contacted at [chris@creativesemiotics.co.uk](mailto:chris@creativesemiotics.co.uk)