

THE COMMODITIZATION OF INTERCULTURAL SERVICES

When buying clothes, the shopper expects the garments to fit the wearer. Tucker makes the case that intercultural services should be purchased the same way: to fit the user's needs and goals. The selling of services as commodities runs contradictory to this idea and erodes the efficacy of such services.

BY MICHAEL F. TUCKER, PH.D., CMC

Commodity (k-'mōd'it-ē) n. anything bought and sold; any article of commerce.

A young lady at her relocation company's headquarters in the Midwest had just been informed by her sales representative on the West Coast that he has just closed an outsource deal with a client company in the Rocky Mountains. This client company was moving a group of people to Europe.

She called a "culture trainer" on her list in the client company location that she has never met for an

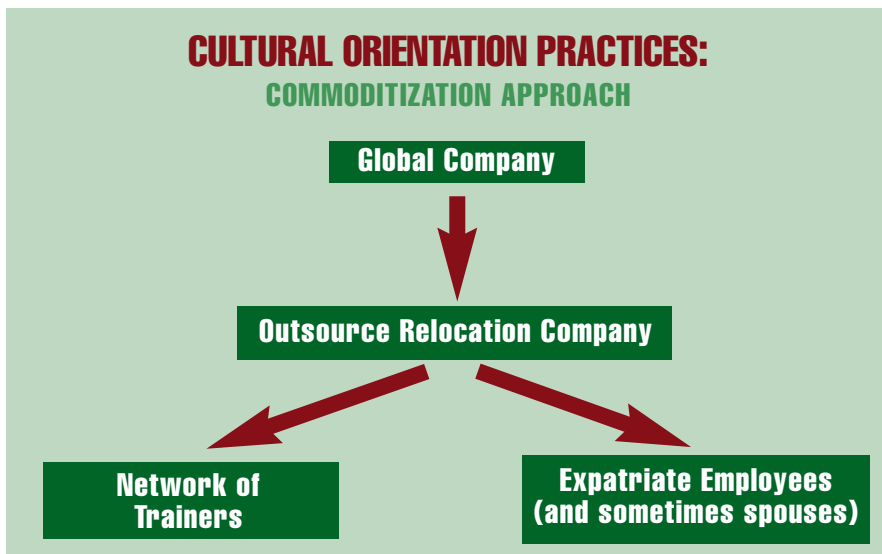
assignment to deliver a "cultural orientation" within the week for the first relocating employee and spouse.

There was to be no client-company or project analysis, and no participant needs assessments. She had not met the client company representatives and knew little about the project in Europe. The trainer's assignment was to deliver a two-day cultural orientation within a limited budget, with only one resource person. There was to be a response-sheet evaluation, but no long-term evaluation.

The orientation was delivered. The client company was pleased with the low costs and quick responsiveness of the relocation company, and the participants found the orientation especially interesting, since they had never before been involved in this sort of thing. The actual intercultural adjustment success of the couple in Europe is unknown, and the job performance effectiveness of the employee is unknown.

The Purchasing Mentality

This all too common example of what intercultural services have become in the corporate world can be called "commodi-



tization.” It is a shift from a true service focus to what Ann Van Damme (*MOBILITY*, April 2002, p. 80) has called a “purchasing department” methodology, more commonly used to acquire “things” rather than service. This process is illustrated above.

As this illustration shows, there is little or no interaction between the trainer and the client company (or the expatriating participants, until they show up for the orientation).

Some would say, “Oh, but we contract with cultural trainers in the destination country,” as if this makes up for the inadequacies of the commoditization approach. It does not, especially when such in-country programs focus more on settling-in than intercultural issues.

A Proper Example

The above situation is in stark contrast with the following example. An international HR director at her global company’s headquarters contacts her intercultural consulting company to discuss a new company project in Africa.

The consulting company knew the client organization well in terms of its international business strategy and international assignment policy and practices. She invited the consulting company to a meeting at headquarters to discuss the project. During the meeting, a review of the project was conducted—its business goals and schedule, organizational structure, and staffing plan.

The consulting company was dis-

- **No Job, Company, or Project Situation Assessment**
- **Little or No Participant Needs Assessment**
- **Standard Designs**
- **One- or Two-day Orientations**
- **One Trainer and One or Two Resources**
- **Short-term Evaluations Only**

adaptable candidates and spouses were chosen to go on a “look-see” and homefinding visit. They then completed written and telephone needs assessments with the consulting company.

The consulting company designed a five-day intercultural program, which was delivered for everyone assigned to the project—employees, spouses, and children. Immediate post-program evaluations were conducted and subsequent programs were modified based on the evaluations.

About one-year into their assignments in Africa, the consulting company evaluated the success of the intercultural adjustment and expatriate job performance, as well as the success and usefulness of the intercultural program that they had received. Particular areas in need of further intercultural adjustment to life and work in Africa were identified for further and deeper adjustment.

The project was a success from many perspectives—no early returns, business objectives were met, and



patched to Africa, where a situation and project assessment was conducted with company representatives, local informants, and current expatriates from other companies.

The next step in the process was for the consulting company to provide an intercultural assessment and selection program among multiple candidates for the project along with their spouses. The most culturally

- **Company and Project Situation Assessment**
- **Participant Needs Assessment**
- **Intercultural Assessment and Selection**
- **Custom Design**
- **Three or More Program Days**

high levels of intercultural adjustment and expatriate job performance were achieved.

This approach is illustrated by the diagram on the previous page.

In contrast to the “one trainer/one or two resource” approach discussed earlier, the consulting staff-intensive approach includes all the staff listed to the right.

Balancing Best with Cost

When comparing the two examples given above, the difference between a commoditization approach versus a true service approach for preparing expatriates for international assignments becomes obvious.

Commoditizing intercultural services produces short programs that are not tailored to the company, project, or specific job of the employee.

While it is better to do something rather than nothing for expatriate

CONSULTANT STAFF INTENSIVE

- **Highly Qualified Senior Consultant**
- **Expert on the Assignment Country**
- **Business Culture Consultant**
- **Belief Systems Consultant**
- **Host Country Resource People**
- **Returned Expatriate Spouse**
- **Assessment and Development Consultant**
- **Highly Qualified Youth Consultants**

employees, how can the company assess whether what they are doing is benefiting the expatriate, the project, or the company as a whole without evaluation and feedback?

In an ideal world, every global company would use a comprehensive and even elegant intercultural service such as the one presented in the example above.

Unfortunately, corporate budgets

do not always allow international HR professionals to take their expatriate programs to this level.

The intercultural services approach illustrated in the “best practices” example given is certainly most applicable and affordable when a fairly large group is being mobilized.

However, many of the aspects of this approach are practical and applicable even for single assignments.

With a global company’s success often depending to a great extent on the successful intercultural adjustment of their expatriates, it is critical that those companies try and provide as many of the services from the “best practices” method as possible. **■**



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