

Cultural Diversity and the Fitness Industry

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In a recent Canadian film, **Sabah**, a 40-something, unmarried, Lebanese immigrant woman decides to step out of her prescribed cultural role, and shows up at a local recreation centre. She wants to take a swim – she recollects the beach back home where she swam with her family as a child. But back home, grown women splash in water up to their waists, fully-clothed with head coverings intact.



Her challenges? Sabah knows she can't do that here at the pool. She's bought a modest bathing suit, but has never worn it in a pool, or in public anywhere. She's concerned about men being in the pool area. She knows her family would be displeased with her venture. She's concerned about what her body will look like to others around her. She feels totally exposed, and intimidated by the unfamiliar environment.

Wouldn't it be great if the fitness staff understood Sabah's challenges, were sensitive to her needs, and helped make this a very positive experience for her? [Maybe even know how to pronounce her name properly] Because if they don't, she's not coming back!

Cultural Intelligence can impact the bottom line

How we interact with clients from cultures different from our own is going to impact customer recruitment, satisfaction, and retention, -- which all impact sales and economic returns.

Technical proficiency may not be sufficient for effective engagement with clients from diverse cultures. Just as we provide certified training and club programming for special populations like kids, senior or pregnant moms, we need to be considering similar issues in regard to people of diverse cultures.

Conducting effective fitness programming with persons from unfamiliar cultures requires recognition of the validity of the client's way of viewing the world around them. In a recent training program at **Cedar Springs Health, Sports and Racquet Club** in Burlington, Ontario, a management group looked at the specific cultural demographics of their area. With a city population of 170,000, 22% of residents were not born in Canada. That's 1 in 5. More specifically, the single largest cultural grouping is South Asian – 5000 residents. And if South Asians live in Burlington, they are likely to have disposable income for recreation. The question is, where are they spending it?

As the group discussed one cultural variable – individualism vs collectivism – they were able to see how differences in values between Euro-background Canadians and South Asian Canadians would affect marketing, reception, fitness engagement, and retention.

Marketing

The Western emphasis on individualism means that we market our facilities specifically to the **personal** benefits that a customer might get out of participating in a fitness program. A South Asian worldview emphasizes the importance of functioning together as a group, communally, or as a family. A better marketing focus would emphasize **groups** of friends joining a program together, or as a family unit, rather than as individuals.

Reception

A key factor between the public and your facility is reception staff, both on the phone and at the front desk. Are there ways of listening and responding to people of other cultures that are different from how I might interact with people of my own culture? Often accents over the phone or in person are a challenge for people with limited intercultural experience. Remember, the person on the other end of the phone with a South Asian accent may be the wife of a medical doctor who is inquiring about purchasing a family membership for the next 2 years for her extended family of 14 who live in the area.

Fitness Participation

If there is a significant South Asian population in your community who may be considering joining the facility, you might be asking: what do I know about differences of body image perception between my culture and theirs? Are there personal space factors that are different from my culture? Are there same-sex, opposite-sex, interpersonal boundaries that are different? Do I have assumptions about fitness and the use of equipment that might be different in other cultures? If I want these clients, what will we do to adjust and accommodate?



Satisfaction and Retention

What factors are going to keep people of differing cultures making use of your facility and renewing memberships? Back to the collective vs individual value difference. If one person within a South Asian family or friends group has a bad experience, it is more than likely that you will lose all 14 customers.

Do you have someone on your staff who is **interculturally competent**?

Intercultural competence is the "acquired ability to perceive, communicate, shift perspectives and adapt behaviour in a manner that enables intercultural effectiveness." Identifying these kind of people within your staff and providing training for staff with limited intercultural experience can give you access to markets that you have not yet tapped. In the present Canadian social context, fitness professionals who can add 'intercultural competence' to their resumes are doing themselves, and the industry, a favour.



Rob Pelletier, of **The Main Event** (Burlington, ON) a certified MMA coach and fitness professional in the martial arts and boxing industry – himself of Aboriginal background – believes that sport and fitness is one of the ways that people of different cultural backgrounds can find some social *common ground*. Pelletier, a former sparring partner for Muhammad Ali, says ‘boxing gyms have a history of bringing people together from all cultures and races – in the midst of all the interaction, everybody learns from everybody else.’”

If your facility is located in a culturally diverse market, and you want to connect with people not presently using your programs, or just ramp up your cultural intelligence for customer satisfaction and retention, consider finding an intercultural competency training provider.

*Dan Sheffield and Syam Chandra are partners in **CultureShift**, a Hamilton, Ontario, consulting and training group specializing in the development of intercultural competence. Both have years of work and life experience in diverse cultures around the world. Dan’s experience in non-profit, charitable organizations and Syam’s work in the IT and medical industries, bring unique perspectives to their training programs.*

