There are many dangers to categorizing the Caribbean as a homogenous entity. Each island carries its own history, culture, style and nuances, all of which inform unique communication patterns. The rhythms of some islands are generalized as relaxed and carefree—something the tourism industry has used to promote those locations, with taglines that imply that the slower pace is a welcome respite for those who live life in the fast lane. That pace may exist in some environments, but it is not the rule.

That said, I use the word Caribbean here in all of its multifaceted meaning. Many of us as business communicators are asked to help organizations overcome a common business challenge: How do we get service providers to deliver good customer service? The global economic crisis has forced everyone to take a closer look at the way they do business, and many companies have articulated a change in strategy that involves deepening relationships with customers and building customer loyalty. Key to this process is the way they communicate with their customers. For businesses, that means making sure employees deliver the high level of customer service that would increase customer loyalty.

The “laissez-faire” Caribbean attitude is often blamed for poor customer service in our businesses. But in many hotels and resorts, for example, service is impeccable—not the standard for all but certainly a predominant trend in the islands that are financially dependent on tourism. On the other hand, government offices and other businesses that experience high customer traffic, such as supermarkets and medical centers, have a reputation for poor service. In these instances, the perceived culprits include human resource limitations, lack of monetary motivation and poor management.

While these factors may contribute to poor customer service, the primary mistake that most corporate trainers make in developing their service providers in the Caribbean is failing to analyze the Caribbean culture, and thus applying mismatched training programs to employees.

According to Sandra Husbands, managing director of Barbados-based Business Development Services Inc., Caribbean culture is best classified as a “relationship culture,” which is starkly different from the “performance culture” that exists in the U.S. and the U.K., among other places. In a relationship culture, individuals maintain loyalty to a person, not
a goal, whereas a performance culture is quite the opposite.

"When Caribbean people give service, we give it as friends, but we do so in a particular way," explains Husbands. "We observe the other person and hold back our response until we are sufficiently satisfied that the other person is as open, honest and genuine as we are. We essentially believe that I will give you my heart if you give me yours."

This implies that quality service is inconsistent in a relationship culture because, unless the customer can prove his or her warmth and authenticity to the service provider, the provider hesitates to reciprocate in a similar manner.

In hotels and restaurants where good customer service is practiced and the service provider and customer are able to make positive contact, there is a prevailing warm energy. After the initial interaction, if the service provider encounters the customer in a setting outside of work, he or she typically greets the customer as a friend in an emotionally positive transaction. However, in a performance-based culture, such warm interaction is more the exception than the rule.

What does this mean for Caribbean communicators? It is clear that the communication process in a relationship culture should be handled very differently compared with other mainstream models. Communication in a relationship culture is emotional, so we must commit ourselves to being honest and open—the notion of "don't take it personally" really does not exist here. Instead of overemphasizing the customer relationship, the corporate trainer and the employee being trained in customer service techniques must build their own bond of loyalty first and foremost, and then an atmosphere of camaraderie in the workplace.

The value of interpersonal or face-to-face communication is also high in a relationship culture. Communicators undoubtedly see the merits of the varied forms of social media, but social media are merely an extension of what we attempt to achieve through face-to-face communication. Sometimes there really is no substitute for a face-to-face conversation, especially in a training and development environment. Direct eye contact, a friendly tone, honesty and openness bring credibility to the trainer. Trainers should be willing to share themselves, not just in terms of their knowledge but also through glimpses of their personalities, because this humanizes the process and the employee's perception of the trainer. Sharing contacts and anecdotes (about family life, embarrassing moments, professional mistakes and personal successes), speaking frankly about life experiences and giving honest feedback are all excellent practices for an employer or trainer.

Recognition of the value of emotions should be balanced with some degree of focus on results and goals, which means that the relationship culture should aim to strike a balance with the performance culture. The challenge is how to articulate those goals in a way that compels the service provider to make them inherently meaningful to their own personal development.

Relationships determine the success of any campaign or communication exercise. In a relationship culture, training customer service providers requires a great deal of creativity, patience, humility and understanding. As long as service providers are trained to align their professional goals with their own personal development, the inward motivation to consistently deliver quality customer service can be sustained, and can go a long way in helping a company build its brand and develop customer loyalty.

In a relationship culture, the value of face-to-face communication is high, and companies should work to help employees develop customer service skills.

about the author

Candace Ali is the group corporate communications officer at Neal & Massy Group of Companies. She is a member of the IABC/Trinidad and Tobago chapter.