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«Ichi-go ichi-e»

by Timo Albiez

Allow me to start this text with a personal anecdote.

Six months ago, my wife and I were invited to dinner by a successful Japanese entrepreneur. A gentleman - I estimate in his late seventies - who runs a global company in the field of dental technology and has now set up camp in central Switzerland. I was told that it was a great honour to be invited and to spend time within the host's own four walls. I was therefore a little nervous and very excited to see how the evening would go.

Without dwelling on all details, the evening proved to be amusing, communicative, culinarily highly enriching and broadened horizons. Any concerns about potential intercultural «faux pas» that could have happened to us were rendered moot. My «chop-stick skills» were - and still are - in need of improvement, but that didn't matter at all that particular evening.

What impressed me, however, was the fact that the host fully engaged with us and showed great interest in us with his numerous questions and topics raised. He was present and fully immersed in the moment of the situation. That fascinated me: no distractions, no side activities - he was with us consciously and attentively.

Pondering this situation, I remember a column I read recently that describes exactly this philosophy of Japanese culture: «Ichi-go ichi-e» - a Japanese phrase that translates as «just for this one time». In our latitudes, this would probably be equivalent to the phrase «live every day as if it were your last». «Ichi-go ichi-e» is not just a saying, but an attitude that is also used in the Japanese tea ceremony. According to historical tradition, the idea was first put down on paper in 1588, when a tea ceremony student learnt the following sentence from his master:

«Ichi-go ichi-e»

«Treat your guest - your friend - your host - your master as if your encounter were only once in a lifetime». This means: when you meet someone and have a conversation with them, make an effort and engage with them as if you would never have another opportunity to do so. The moment is unique and will never be repeated - so let's enjoy the moment!

Let's take this philosophy and apply it to our interactions with customers. Let's be critical: isn't it the case that we are easily distracted, whether by our ringing smartphone, an e-mail notification that pops up or a fleeting thought. This is precisely how we violate the preciousness of the moment and fail to show the other person the necessary appreciation, which ultimately affects the quality and sustainability of the contact.

What do we take away from the «Ichi-go ichi-e» wisdom of life?

Show real presence: when we speak to customers, whether in person, on the phone or by e-mail, we should be fully present in that moment. This means putting aside all distractions and giving the conversation our full attention. Our counterpart can sense when we are really listening and taking their concerns seriously.

Individualised appreciation: every customer is unique and should be treated as

such. With «Ichi-go ichi-e», we learn to recognise and appreciate the uniqueness of every interaction. This can manifest itself in small gestures, such as remembering previous conversations or customising our services to the customer's specific needs.

Quality over quantity: in a world that is often driven by the number of interactions and quick results, «Ichi-go ichi-e» reminds us that the quality of each individual encounter matters. One meaningful conversation can be far more effective than many superficial contacts.

Create positive experiences: every interaction offers the opportunity to leave a positive and lasting impression. By being aware of the uniqueness of the moment, we can work more consciously to ensure that our customers leave the encounter with a good feeling.

Learning and growing: «Ichi-go ichi-e» also teaches us to learn from every moment. Every interaction with customers can provide valuable insights, whether through feedback, recognising new needs or gathering ideas to improve our services.

With this in mind, we are delighted that you have taken the time to read these lines and hopefully enjoy the moment with this philosophy in mind!

«Ichi-go ichi-e»



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