

Lunds: Speaking customers' languages

Written by Ahmed Tharwat
Tuesday, 17 June 2014 16:18

More than 30 years ago, I was a young immigrant who made his long journey from Egypt – a very old country, but to America, a very new country.

It was a trip to the unknown, a trip to a place that I only could imagine from images reflected in American movies.

The trepidation, the excitement, the anticipation of the nuances in America, where everything is big and everyone is busy, intrigued me. I found myself looking around every time someone said, "Have a nice day" or looking up every time someone said, "What's up." But nothing was so intriguing and culturally transforming as when I stopped at the Lunds supermarket at Hennepin Avenue and Lake Street in Uptown Minneapolis, across from my first apartment by Lake Calhoun, where I finally learned what it means to have a "room of your own."

At Lunds, entering the store is like entering heaven as described to Muslims – fruits and vegetables, milk and honey – but with the only virgin to be found in the olive oil. I was overwhelmed not just by the amount and the variety of foods available before my eyes, but also that it was all within my reach, unlike the stores back home in Egypt I used to go to. No one was standing between my favorite food and me so I could just have as much ice cream and candy as I wanted. Nobody would hand me my item along with questioning my judgment or taste. I may not be totally free but I'm a free shopper, and you can do anything and express your individuality through shopping. Along with the allure, Lund's supermarket was a very welcoming place and you do not need to speak too much English to get what you wanted.

I especially admired the produce section, which speaks a universal language of its own with aisles of colorful rows of beautiful fruits and vegetables – oranges, grapes, peaches, pomegranates and strawberries – all looking welcoming. I spent lots of time looking at the colorful American cheese wrapped in its glossy plastic, flirting with you but keeping its distance as I passed by. Walking through the soft drink aisle, wrapped in the red and white cans and looking like an American flag was Coke. I filled my shopping cart with all my favorite foods.

People may not be conversing with you, but brands are smiling and talking to you. I even picked up a bunch of flowers to give them to the beautiful young clerk at the checkout counter, and as she tried to put them in my bag, I told her that they were for her. She was confused but managed to say thank you. I took my filled shopping bags and went home, wanting to be alone with all this wonderful food. I unpacked the bag, picking out my food one by one and carefully putting them away. Then my first disappointment in America, my first cultural wake-up call. I looked at the empty shopping bags, and I was so pleased to find "thank you" written in many languages on them, but much to my surprise, I noticed that there wasn't a thank you in Arabic, which made me wonder why.

This was more than 20 years before 9/11. I took my bags back to the store, which was their headquarters at the time.

"Why don't you want to thank me in my own language," I asked the general manager there.

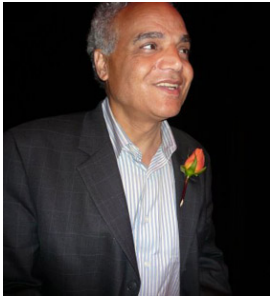
"We just don't know how to write in Arabic," said the GM.

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That was before Google Translator. So, I took a piece of paper, and wrote "شكرا," which is thank you in Arabic, and left it there, and told him "Shokran."

Now you don't just see it, but you hear it. I forgot about this for a long time but a few years later, to my surprise, I found the word thank you in Arabic written on all their shopping bags. Recently, I found the same "Shokran" not on a bag, but on the wall of the newest deli store of the Lunds line ... and it is the only hand written thank you. Thank you Lunds. Now you speak my language.



Ahmed Tharwat is a host of the Arab American TV show "BelAhdan" on TPT MN.