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Service With a Smile

By The Moscow Times

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I spent the last four days in London, without my family. This was an interesting experience because not having the children to entertain and wrangle with freed my attention sufficiently to notice a few things that I wouldn't normally remark upon. Perhaps it's because I used to be too close to the city — it was my benchmark of "normal" — whereas now, nearly two years after leaving, my expectations and measures of "normal" have changed.

Once upon a time, for example, I would not have been at all surprised by courtesy as a part of everyday life. On this visit, however, I was impressed to see how many people were polite to each other. And I'm not just talking about the service culture being a little more established over there than it is here, no, this is politeness as a two-way street. Not only were cashiers, servers, waiters and suchlike helpful and polite to their customers, but — get this — their customers were polite back!

No grunting, no muttering, no avoidance of eye-contact, no shouting across restaurants waving your hand in the air for service. Instead, people were politely chatting at tills, exchanging pleasantries (invariably about the weather; the British do run true to type on this

one), and even smiling at each other.

There could be any number of reasons for this difference in day-to-day life between what I experience here in Moscow and what I saw in London. It could be that I just happened to strike lucky while visiting the latter. Certainly, if you speak to a Londoner, they will say that it is a very unfriendly place to live these days and remark on how standards have dropped. It could be that that people are simply glad to either have a job selling products or the money to spend on them given the economic gloom in the country. Or, it could be that my benchmark for common courtesy has been significantly lowered by my time here.

At the risk of offending a city of 16 million people, I suspect that it is the last of those.

I understand that Moscow is a hard place to live. Money is tight everywhere, the traffic is terrible, the weather is often inhospitable. Families live in close quarters, competition is fierce, you never know what's coming tomorrow. The world is a frightening place, and it's tempting to batten down the hatches and simply conserve the energy it takes to engage socially with another human being at the supermarket, the petrol station, or the cafe, and save it for the fight.

I also know that many people believe there have been great strides in recent years, and to a certain extent that's true. Certainly the goods and services you can access here nowadays are not so different from those "back home." But a decent service culture is only a part of the puzzle and is unlikely to be achieved without some positive feedback from those on the receiving end.

Moscow is a great and exciting city, as I'm constantly telling those who've never visited. But from my limited viewpoint, I would venture to say that life could be so much easier if we were all a little nicer to each other.

It's all very well to expect service with a smile. But you can expect it all you like; you won't see anywhere near as much of it if you aren't prepared to give one in return.

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