# What makes me smile

It’s a common belief that Russians never smile. Popularized by the media, movies, countless jokes and anecdotes this stereotype has become very exaggerated. In reality, Russians, as well as people from other ex-USSR countries, smile quite a lot, and are not in fact grumpy every day of the week. Russians, unlike Americans, don’t smile just to be polite. If a Russian is smiling at you - their smile will most likely be a genuine expression of their positive attitude and sympathy towards you.

However, as with any stereotype, there is some truth to it. It has been documented that the employees of the first ever Mcdonald’s venue in the USSR had to be trained to smile while serving customers. It was never a tradition for Soviet service workers to smile at work, much to the surprise of western managers. These days we universally agree that a smile is important for a service worker. Countless studies have shown that customers tend to pay more and are more likely to become repeat customers if they feel welcome and well-respected while being served at a restaurant, store or when receiving any other service such as a haircut or phone repair. So why didn’t Soviet service workers smile? I am convinced this has to do with the nature of the Soviet economy.

While maximizing profits and retaining customers are top priorities for any business in a competitive capitalist economy, an average Soviet business had very different goals. Unlike in the West, the Soviet Union had a centralized, command type economy. In this type of economy businesses don’t compete with each other as their sole purpose is to fulfill a plan. In a capitalist economy customers vote with their wallets. This makes customer satisfaction vital to business and good service is key to customer satisfaction. Command-economy businesses, on the other hand, could often disregard the customer completely. Without any need to compete for customers, quality of service can degrade quickly. This is the single most important reason soviet waiters were not used to smiling at work.

A good illustration of that quality of the Soviet economy is Sergei Dovlatov’s short story “Krepovye finskiye noski”. Despite the demand, no soviet factory was producing a certain type of socks. They quickly became hard-to-find and highly-valued goods. This inspired two shady soviet entrepreneurs (“farcovshiki”) to purchase these socks from the neighbouring Finland in order to resell them in the USSR with a high markup. However, the Soviet government finally noticed the demand for the socks and adjusted the plan, flooding the market with socks overnight and putting the two out of business before they could make any sales.

Another reason waiters in modern day Russia smile way more than their soviet colleagues also has to do with the economy. Much like in the western world, waiters in Russia have very low salaries and rely on tips to get by. However, unlike in the US, tipping culture has only emerged over the past 30 years in Russia. Tips have to be earned and waiters do their best to satisfy customers so they tip more. This includes smiling and being polite at work. Back in the soviet times customers were not used to tipping and waiters had no financial incentive to smile. They also had bigger salaries and did not rely on tips to pay for their living as much as today’s waiters do.

As for me personally, I am convinced that a smile is very important for a service worker. As a paying customer, I value the experience I get when making a purchase or receiving a service. I am willing to pay more if it means getting better treatment from a business. I also don’t leave tips if I feel disrespected or unimportant to the business. On the other hand, it can really brighten my day when I get treated with a lot of respect and care. A smiling waiter can even put a smile on my own face, so, in a way, smiles are contagious.

Many things can put a smile on my face. Spending time with my family, my girlfriend, and my friends always makes me smile. It can also be something as simple as having a tasty meal or enjoying a walk outside in good weather. I believe that a way to happiness in life is to value every little thing. Sometimes I don’t feel well and might be sad or grumpy, but simply playing with my dog or listening to my favourite song can change everything. I think it is important to remind yourself to smile from time to time, even if it is for the smallest reasons.