

# ROBERT KEITH'S STYLE: CUSTOMER SERVICE & CULTURAL AWARENESS



Robert Keith is the general manager of The Gap Tucson Mall. You can immediately sense he is all things GAP. He has been on the retailers' frontlines

for 17 years, 16 of those in Tucson. His extensive retail experience in the region makes him the perfect asset to talk about the idiosyncrasies of the Mexico market.

We had a candid one-on-one to learn about his perspective on the Mexico market. Read on to learn about his view, his approach and his wish list.

**Do you feel that GAP as a corporation understands the region and the importance of the cross-border shopper?** I would say yes and no. Gap is a big company and understands the big picture in a really good way but it is up to me to represent locally what's happening on the front lines.

I came from the East coast to Tucson and I didn't necessarily know how unique the Tucson market was at the time. I really learned from my partnership with Felipe and *Vamos a Tucson* about making that connection and really fostering our relationships with that customer to make sure that we have customer loyalty. To learn how to make them happy and getting what they want and we get what we want.

**Has corporate acknowledged the uniqueness of the region?** A couple of years ago, our past CEO visited Texas, Arizona, Florida, and did a tour around those border

stores. It is definitely something that has been looked at. It was right before we started to expand globally. But yes, he was here checking things out and hearing from us.

**What are the demographics of the market? And what are they shopping?** Young families. Shopping mostly for kids. Definitely, more for kids than adults.

**That is surprising, I thought it was going to be Women's more than anything.** I know, it is funny, we have noticed that there is a difference between our local customer and our Mexico shopper. They buy more men's. I don't know why that is but we have a strong men's jean business. So, yes shopping mostly for Dad and for the kids.

**Do you have frequent/regular customers?** *Oh my gosh!* Yes. So, I have been in Tucson for 16 years. I started off at Tucson Mall, the last 10 years I was at Park Place and just this last year came back to Tucson Mall. I was working the Holiday my first Christmas back and I had a customer come up to me and say '*Oh my gosh, you are still here*' and we recognize each other from 15 years ago. But yes, definitely we have that loyal, repeat customer.

**How do you approach the influx of customers from Mexico?** Over the years, our standard is to have at least 30% of our staff to be bilingual. Because, ideally, everybody likes to shop in their own language, right? They are going to have a better experience, they are going to make a better connection, and the more likely they will be coming back. So, we try to have the staff to reflect that, so yes, at least 30% if not more bilingual.

We also have a calendar of Holidays in Mexico. We definitely use that to know what's going, what's coming up and that helps us staff better to make sure we have those bilingual people on the floor when we need them.

**Other than language, do you prepare with your staff to welcome the Mexico visitor?** Any sales associate that doesn't speak Spanish, we try to build on cultural awareness. We know

that if we have people coming from across the border to shop, it is most likely going to be the whole family here, lots more people, making sure we have a place where grandma can sit and be patient, trying to keep the kids busy so Mom and Dad can shop.

We can also have interesting situations. We have had people come with empty luggage to fill up. One time, someone left a luggage behind and nowadays luggage unattended is a 'no-no', so we had to call the police. Thankfully, the owners came back. They lost track of time and the luggage while shopping around the mall.

**What would you say is your competitive advantage to gain and retain the Mexico market?** It all comes back to that connection we were talking about. If I am doing my part to really connect with that customer, to make sure I have bilingual staff and that we are fully staffed on those busy Holidays, they are going to remember that, and they are going to be loyal and come back. That is what I focus on; on making that connection. That is why I really appreciate my partnership with *Vamos a Tucson*. They help me get out flyers and coupons to keep that traffic. And then here, if we are giving them an experience, I know they are going to come back.

**So, it seems that the Mexico visitor is very keen on customer service. Does it go the same way for your local customer or does it differ?** The umbrella of customer service applies to everyone. However, I think there are certain things that are different, mainly culturally. The shopper that doesn't live here is here to shop. Maybe the Mexican shopper tries on more things because their intent is to come shop so they have to get all their shopping done in a short period of time. They are on a mission. So yes, customer service is a big thing for us for every customer keeping in mind cultural awareness.

**What would you say is the strongest season, besides Christmas?** Easter for sure. It is a huge part of the Mexican tourist coming. We feel it start and end.

**How is it to forecast/prepare for Easter since it can fall in different months depending on the year?** We definitely see the spikes in whatever month Easter falls. And there is also Benito Juarez's birthday, always in March. We have seen that if that Holiday is close to Easter they only come once and if they are far apart they come twice. So, we definitely look at that, look at the dates, the Holidays, so we can prepare with time.

**Is it hard to explain and plan for the spikes due to the Easter calendar?** Yes. The challenge for me, for example, right now, I don't feel I have the inventory levels to support the big business we have for the next couple of weeks and it is hard for me to get that part to change because they just look at the store as a whole for the year and they allot me a certain amount. But the two weeks around Easter I always need more, and it is always a conversation I am having with my boss.

**What if the Mexico customer would stop coming?** Well, that happened when that legislation (SB1070) came about and it was horrible! We felt it immediately. It hurt us in a big way. To reiterate on the importance, just last Tuesday, my sales doubled year to year on that day and it was only a couple of families from Mexico.

**In your ideal world, is there something, in your opinion, that THE GAP should be doing to further impact the Mexico market?** If there was a wish list? I would ask for more budget to market. I wish I could take more advantage of the benefits of *Vamos a Tucson*. I know we haven't been able to. For years, I have tried to get bilingual signage with no luck. We have a strong Mexico national customer presence and I would love to just go after it more and market to it in a bigger way.

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Interviewed by Guillian Bon