

# Kreng jai and promises

*Thais and foreigners often interpret the word 'promise' differently*

## Bridging the Gap

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A few years ago, I bought a new house and had to buy several home-related items. A lot of those big and bulky items — furniture, appliances and so on — required delivery at home. Out of 20 items only one was delivered at the promised time.

Take the example of the washing machine. The sales person told me that it would be delivered at 1 pm the following Saturday. On the day, the delivery man called me at 2 pm and said he would come at 3 pm. My washing machine finally arrived at 6 pm. Sound familiar?

I keep asking myself why? What about my foreign friends who live in Thailand? I guess they feel even more frustration than I do since they came from societies where a promise is very important.

For what it is worth, as a Thai, when my foreign friends ask why a straightforward delivery appointment is so difficult to keep, here are some answers:

- ◆ **Sales people promise too much:** When the customer purchases a large item, he or she specifies a time when delivery would be most convenient. In Thailand, we are brought up in a society that makes it very hard to say "no". The salesperson, even if he is aware that the delivery schedule is full will not want to seem impolite. Instead of saying, "I am sorry, we cannot make delivery at that time — would later in the day be okay for you?" he will simply agree to the time proposed by the customer. This is *kreng jai* — actually a form of respect for others, especially those who are senior or in a position of power. Thus, out of respect and a willingness to help, the salesperson will agree to whatever demand the customer makes about delivery — even if he or she knows it is not going to be possible to fulfill the delivery promise.
- ◆ **Lack of training:** Shops in Thailand do not put a lot of effort or expenditure into staff training. The stock the showroom, prime location — all are seen as legitimate business expenses. Staff training is very much at the bottom of the list of business priorities.

◆ **Poor internal communication:** The customer may see the salesperson write down the time on a delivery order but there is no guarantee of a timely delivery.

The delivery man most likely can read but he may have a low education level. He quite possibly does not like to read. The school system in Thailand does not in general instill a joy of learning into children. Slow learners are penalised severely and in my experience many Thais prefer oral communication.

Therefore, the next time you see the salesperson write down a delivery time, why not ask him or her to pick up the phone and confirm the appointment orally with the delivery department?

◆ **No feedback from customers:** Thais are trained from an early age to avoid conflict. We strive for harmony and compromise where necessary. Thais seldom complain to shop owners and when they do, others might say the complaint is far too aggressive and fussy. But what is even worse is when the customer just leaves and goes to another vendor and tells friends about how poor the service was at the shop.

The uncomplaining customer actually does more damage to the vendor.

*San ya* means "promise" in Thai. However, I have noticed that the level of commitment to a promise by Thais and foreigners is quite different.

For example, if the boss assigns new work to Somchai and asks for it to be completed by next Friday at 9 am, Somchai will usually say "yes". With only one word the interpretations are already different.

The perception of the boss is that, "yes", Somchai promises she can deliver the work by next Friday at 9 am. But the perception of Somchai is "Yes, I know that you want it by 9 am next Friday. I will do my best. But I am not sure if I can finish it or not. However, I think you will be not angry with me if I cannot finish within the proposed time frame as long as I try my best."

But when the deadline arrives and the work is not finished, the boss will be angry with Somchai. Somchai will be frustrated about the boss's manner which will be perceived as *jai dam* (black heart or cruel).

Suggestion: In the same scenario, when Somchai says "yes", the boss should reinforce and reconfirm his needs, perhaps by saying: "Khun Somchai, I need your work for my report to head office in the United States by 9 am next Friday. You have made a promise to me, based on the understanding that it's realistic to deliver on time, is that right? If you cannot keep your promise, I will not be able to keep my promise to the head office as well."

"In the US, they don't have the word *mai pen rai*. In fact they have an expression to describe it called 'poor performance for being unable to deliver as promised'. I hope you now understand the importance of the word 'promise'".

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Please note: The writer of the article is expressing his own opinion, and perhaps using one interpretation of the Thai term *kreng jai*. He uses an illustration that might be easy for foreigners to relate to. Some people might interpret the meaning of the term in a different way, which could cast a negative light on the example used, but it is this writer's belief that this was not intentional.