

Broadening Global Awareness

Success in the international arena starts with understanding of customs and etiquette.

By Pamela Eyring

AS THE INTERNATIONAL marketplace flourishes, employees are being asked to do more, and with the diversity in the workforce higher than ever and offshoring becoming a viable option, understanding different cultures will prove invaluable.

Listed below are 10 tips to achieve success in the international business arena. They reinforce the talents you already possess and provide valuable soft skills to help you compete in a global economy that demands mental flexibility and awareness. You can use protocol and personal diplomacy to tip the scales in your favor no matter where you conduct business.

Tip 1: Perfect your greetings and introductions. When meeting someone for the first time, you will make a lasting impression on that person within the first few seconds of your greeting. Style and form play a major role in successfully conducting business meetings worldwide. Regardless of the setting, introductions and greetings are an essential element of proper business etiquette.

When you introduce yourself, include your first and last name, your title, and company name. "Good morning, my name is Mary Davis. I'm the vice president of Doe Imports."

Wait to be introduced. Be polite and modest, and wait until the verbal introduction concludes before extending your hand for a handshake. But remain alert and immediately extend your hand if the other person offers hers before the introduction is complete.

Avoid saying "hi" and "hello." These greetings are too casual in international business settings. Saying "hello" with their name is more professional.

Tip 2: Be a world-class handshaker. Customs differ in select countries, but the

American handshake, toned down a bit, is accepted worldwide.

Most Europeans shake hands on arrival and departure. Their grip is light, not firm. In parts of Europe, handshakes last twice as long as U.S. handshakes: five to seven strokes. Pulling your hand away too soon creates an impression of rejection.

Always shake hands with the oldest person or the one of senior rank first, and then proceed on down the line of authority. The higher-ranking person extends his hand first; the lesser-ranking person receives the extended hand. Count on your host to make the necessary introductions in the protocol of handshaking. Make sure every meeting, business or social, begins and ends with a handshake.

Tip 3: Know eye contact etiquette. In the United States, Americans believe that good eye contact is important during business and social conversations. Direct eye contact is a sign of openness, honesty, and assertiveness. Consider cultural differences before departing for another country.

In parts of the Middle East and North Africa, eye contact is intense. People of Arabic descent look deeply into a person's eyes to search the soul and take measure of a personality.

In Thailand, eye contact is used to facilitate daily activities. If you're in a restaurant and need the server, all you'll have to do is catch his eye and raise your eyebrows to get instant service.

In Mexico and Puerto Rico, however, direct eye contact is considered an aggressive gesture. And in Japan, direct eye contact is considered slightly intimidating. However, well-traveled Japanese have studied western culture and make direct eye contact and offer a firm handshake.

Tip 4: Dress appropriately. Business attire in the international arena consists of

quality fabrics and conservative styling in subdued colors. Dress in an understated style, regardless of your gender. The best-known business look in the United States is the Wall Street look. It does not make a fashion statement, but it does have a style that works worldwide. The Wall Street look is not meant to express individuality, but rather to show status in its quality.

Tip 5: Know body language and gestures. The ability to communicate is the key to your success. Be aware of the body language of your international colleagues, and reinforce your position by knowing and using the body language of your client.

Asians avoid any physical contact except a handshake. Keep a distance of at least three feet during conversation. Do not move closer if they back away from you. Britons and Western Europeans avoid excessive hand gestures, touching, and standing too close.

Europeans, Latin Americans, and Arabs will stand close together during conversation. Resist the urge to back away to your comfort zone.

Americans consider an arm's length as sufficient distance while conversing. Don't interpret this as formal. Body language in the United States is very casual by world standards.

Tip 6: Use proper titles. When someone has a title, such as senator, governor, or commander, use it correctly. Research the titles of those with whom you will interact.

Tip 7: Understand rank and status. When visiting another country, be prepared for a formal atmosphere in your business dealings. Codes of etiquette may be elaborate and inflexible in ways you will not encounter in the United States. An awareness of proper behavior is expected inside and outside the office as well as sensitivity to cultural differences that

signal rank and status and how they affect your business relationship.

Your rank in the organization will determine whom you meet in the host country. A manager from the United States will meet with a manager in the host country. Your corporate title may have a different connotation in your host country. Research titles to make sure your position is not lower than the position of the person you are meeting.

Sending a mid-level executive to deal with a high-ranking executive in your host country is interpreted as an insult. The message is clear—you and your company consider the executive or the business itself to be of little importance.

Tip 8: Use business card etiquette. Your business card represents you and your company. Its printing and paper quality should be consistent with the image you wish to convey.

Men and women should carry cards in a card case. Place several cards in your outside jacket pocket for easy access before attending an event. Present your card with your right hand or both hands, with the card's host-language side up and the print facing the recipient so the recipient can read it.

Take your time and look at the card. It is representative of the person. In Asian countries, take the card with both hands and read it thoroughly. Place the guest's card in an appropriate and respectful place.

Place your card in your card case, or in your outside or inside jacket pockets. Never place it in your back trouser pocket because this is considered offensive in some cultures.

Don't write on the card in the person's presence. This is considered rude in some cultures.

Tip 9: Know global conversation skills. Pay attention to the volume of voices around you. If necessary, readjust your voice to a lower level to match the others. Raising your voice won't help the person understand you better.

Don't interrupt when someone is speaking. Don't finish someone's sentence. Both acts project rudeness and impatience, which results in losing information and business.

Don't ask, "Do you understand me?" It's annoying and demeaning. Many people choose to agree rather than appear as if they don't understand you.

Keep still. Too many body movements are annoying and distracting. Refrain from shuffling papers or fidgeting with your pen or other objects.

Prepare yourself in advance to discuss your host country or the homeland of your visitor. Read publications devoted to international news.

Tip 10: Review gift-giving dos and don'ts. Gift-giving customs vary from one country to another. An appropriate gift in a European country may be inappropriate in an Asian country.

Many companies in the United States have a policy that doesn't allow employees to give or receive gifts, or establishes a maximum value on gifts given and received. A visitor should not be offended if someone can't accept a gift. Always check with the embassy of your host country for guidelines.

Some examples of appropriate gifts to give someone from Latin America include fine chocolates, a logo gift, or a handsome art book.

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