

PASSPORT

Women Working Overseas

By Tracey Wilen

In the mid-1980s, Nancy Adler, an organizational behavior professor with McGill University's Faculty of Management, conducted a monumental study. She investigated whether commonly held myths about women in international business were true—such as women aren't interested in international business, women aren't willing to travel overseas because of family responsibilities and other reasons, and women aren't viewed as credible overseas due to local percep-

tions of women. Her study revealed that many of those ideas were indeed myths, often held by male managers and HR people. In fact, women were interested in and willing to conduct business overseas. And since the study, many more women are doing just that. Although Adler's study brought the falsity of such myths to light, many still exist—despite the dramatic increase of women in business, women-owned businesses, and women conducting business overseas.

Photo: FPG/V.C.L.

The U.S. Department of Labor (www.dol.gov), the National Association of Women Business Owners (www.nawbo.org), and the Small Business Administration (www.dol.gov) (www.sba.gov), published these facts:

- Women account for more than 46 percent of the workforce in America, expected to increase to 48 percent by 2005.
- In 2000, women made up 45.3 percent of executive, administrative, and management positions.
- Businesses owned by women number 8 million in the United States and employ one out of every four workers. Women-owned U.S. businesses are growing at double the rate of all businesses.
- Thirty-three percent of women business owners report that they exported in their first or second year of operation, and most were successful on their first transaction.

More women are traveling overseas to conduct business for their corporations or their own business ventures. Still, some guidebooks suggest that women shouldn't participate in international business. Many travel guides don't address women's issues in international business or, worse, suggest that women shouldn't be sent on foreign business assignments due to role differences.

I conducted my own research from 1992 to 1998 that indicates women can participate and are successful in international business despite the various reactions and views they encounter around the world. There is one area that businesswomen find critical to their success abroad: establishing credibility during the initial stages of business.

Establishing your credibility

Men often derive credibility from their gender and status within a company; women's credibility is more often derived from their skills. Many women say they have to work harder to estab-

lish credibility because of their gender. Perhaps this statement from a Los Angeles businesswoman explains the situation best:

When I travel outside of the United States for the corporate office, I'm viewed as foreign first and female second. However, I feel I'm still met with some degree of skepticism as to what my role is and how much authority I have [to represent] the corporate office. Due to that, I take extra steps to make sure that the proper introductions are made in advance to limit concerns that [some locals] might have about my credibility.

To help businesswomen working overseas, here are some pointers for establishing credibility:

Men often derive **credibility** from their gender and **status** within a company; women's credibility is more often derived from their **skills**.

Be visible. Attend and host meetings between your company and your international counterparts whenever possible. International travel is often associated with a firm's decision makers, so being present adds to your credibility.

Get introduced. Introductions are important, particularly for women. If you're doing business with a firm for the first time, have yourself introduced by a higher-ranking person in your company who already knows the people with whom you'll be dealing. If you can't have that person introduce you, ask him or her to send a fax or email in advance outlining your title, responsibilities, and background.

Include a distinct title on your business cards. Identifiers such as *manager* or *director* define your position clearly. If there's any doubt about your

title, an overseas co-worker may assume automatically that you have a lesser role than the male members of your team. To avoid such confusion, some women wear a school ring, graduate school pendant, or corporate pin designating tenure to artfully advertise their background or experience.

Businesspeople in some cultures may look and respond more to the men on your team because outside of the United States, women generally hold fewer executive positions. Prepare by advising colleagues of tactics that will help you and other female team members, such as making seating arrangements that place women in a position of authority.

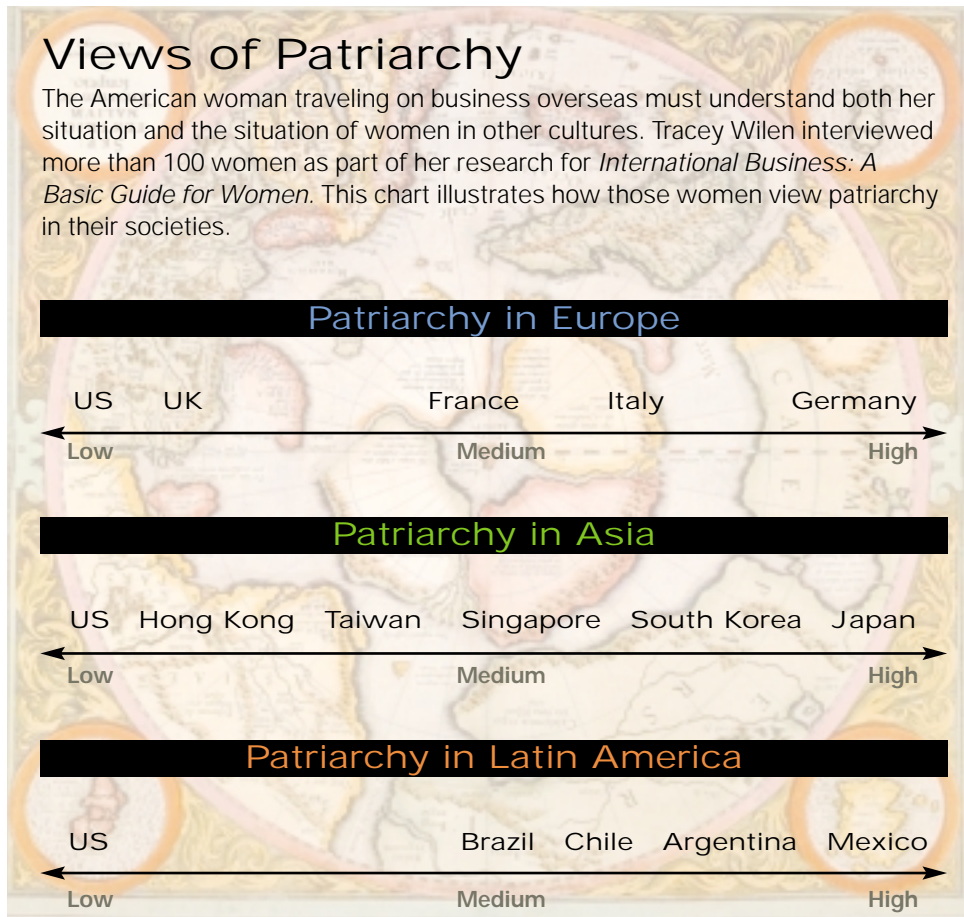
If someone appears confused about

your name and rank, offer another business card even if you've already given one. That subtle tactic reinforces your title and ensures acknowledgment of your participation as an active member at the meeting.

Lead business discussions. If there's only one woman and everyone is of equal rank on your team, the woman should take the lead to help establish her credibility, and team members should defer to her to help reinforce her authority. Some American men may need to be made aware that their tendency to jump in and answer questions, especially when a woman is speaking, can undermine her authority and the team's effectiveness. A woman leader should advise team members not to answer questions directed to her. A good response is, "Jane is the best

Views of Patriarchy

The American woman traveling on business overseas must understand both her situation and the situation of women in other cultures. Tracey Wilen interviewed more than 100 women as part of her research for *International Business: A Basic Guide for Women*. This chart illustrates how those women view patriarchy in their societies.



Understanding the **status of women** in their own environments gives you **insight** into how those cultures may **perceive you**.

person to answer that question.”
 Be professional. Present yourself in a sincere, confident, and professional manner—in appearance and speech—to create a good first impression. Be yourself. Don’t come on too strong, but don’t defer when it’s appropriate for you to respond. Deferring to age and position, however, is always acceptable for both sexes.

Be aware of women’s roles in other countries. Understanding the status of women in their own environments gives you insight into how those cultures may perceive you.

The role of the manager
 Managers can be effective in international business by helping enhance their teams’ credibility. A manager can

introduce staff members by title and outline each person’s area of expertise, act as moderator to refer questions to the appropriate team member, and highlight staff achievements.

Don’t act out of role. It’s important that all team members, including managers, understand their roles in any meetings. If a colleague isn’t participating appropriately for his or her role, call for a break to explain that the group becomes less effective when it’s not cohesive.

Reinforce the authority of female team members during meetings. For example, if a woman isn’t receiving the appropriate respect, the manager can bring attention to her role and authority.

Despite commonly held myths about women in international business, women are traveling and conducting business internationally in increased numbers, and they’re successful in their business dealings. Adler and her fellow researcher, Dafna Izraeli, predict that global competition will completely eliminate the archaic patterns that have underrepresented and underutilized women in management, especially international business. In fact, it’s already occurring.

Tracey Wilen is in business management at Cisco Systems. This article is based on her book *International Business: A Basic Guide for Women*; twilen@cisco.com.