

TEXT 1

International Business Etiquette: Avoiding Business Faux Pas

Travelling overseas for business or hosting international visitors can be an exciting experience. However, cultural boundaries and differences can sometimes lead to extremely uncomfortable – and even offensive – faux pas.

The following areas are the most likely to cause a cross-cultural mistake. By researching the country or culture of those you will be doing business with, you will be able to further avoid any embarrassment.

○ Body language and gestures

What we may consider innocent gestures or facial expressions might mean something entirely different in another culture. Many cultures consider pointing to be extremely rude and offensive; likewise, a simple thumbs up is an offensive gesture in many Middle Eastern countries.

Even handshakes can lost in translation; in the United States, we often view shaking hands as a way to close a deal, but other cultures see it as a sign that negotiations are just beginning.

○ Food

It is important to understand the cultural or religious dietary restrictions in other countries. Doing so may help prevent any major faux pas. Before offering an alcoholic beverage to a potential client, consider their culture. Practitioners of the Mormon, Muslim, or Seventh Day Adventists faiths do not drink alcohol, whereas in Russia it is considered rude to refuse an offer of vodka.

If you find yourself at a silent business lunch, do not be worried. Many cultures do not speak during mealtime, believing that the food should be the focus. Likewise, not eating enough in countries like Greece or Italy may be taken as a sign you were displeased with the food offered.

○ Personal space

How close we stand to another person or how often we touch them varies from culture to culture. In the United States we are accustomed to having a rather large “personal bubble” of 1-2 yards; in most Eastern countries, however, personal space is viewed differently with everyone, including strangers, standing much closer together.

In Mediterranean and South American cultures, it is common to touch or hug acquaintances, friends, and colleagues as a way of connecting. In many Eastern cultures, however, touching is taboo and as much as a simple pat on the back may be offensive.

Navigating the divide between different cultures may seem daunting, but with research you can hope to avoid any major faux pas. While most cultural mistakes can be graciously accepted and forgiven if genuine effort is shown, understanding cultural boundaries when doing business abroad can help you avoid any potentially embarrassing situations.

By Status Flow (on February 23, 2015)

TEXT 2

Six Solid and Simple Tips for Avoiding Cultural Faux Pas When Working Abroad

Are you new to working abroad? Travelling to a foreign country for the first time for business?

Getting it right when working overseas is critical; but what do you do if you have little or no international exposure? You run the danger of too much exposure Borat-style!

Working internationally requires a very different skill-set to working domestically. What works well for you in your home country may count against you when working abroad.

The key to working internationally is to scrap any perception that ‘the way we do things at home’ is the only valid norm when working elsewhere.

It’s natural to view the business approaches you’ve traditionally relied on – indeed been trained in, as ‘the right way’ but the sooner you appreciate these approaches may not go down well on international platforms, the more likely you are to succeed in your new global ventures. Remember it is only the right way in the right context! This advice is key, if not golden, – keep it at the heart of everything you do.

To enhance this, I have pulled together some tips, so simple and solid that anyone can apply them immediately, to further increase your chances of international success.

○ 1 Open Your Eyes and Start to Observe.

Your initial overseas’ encounters will undoubtedly leave you slightly overwhelmed.

Despite this, be sure to retain a keen eye on areas of importance; particularly, the way in which local people communicate with each other, body language, rules of engagement during conversation and conversation turn taking, the way in which people dress and potential gender rules etc.

Your ability to decode situations and recognise underlying dynamics make it more likely that your international venture will go well.

2 Ask Lots of Questions.

In addition to observing, ask as many questions as you can.

Questions present you as someone who is willing and interested; making it more likely that your international peers will support your efforts.

Demonstrating a commitment to creating cultural synergy between the involved parties serves as a strong indicator that you are not operating from a position in which you expect everyone to do it 'your way'.

Navigating foreign cultures can be complex when you don't understand the local rules and etiquette. As such, it cultural blunders can and do happen; sometimes with adverse impacts on relationships and trust.

However, if you have made every effort to demonstrate to your peers that you are willing to learn then it's very likely that potential blunders will be quickly overlooked and forgiven.

3 Allow For More Time & Be Patient

It's not uncommon for transactions between people of different international and cultural backgrounds to take longer than usual.

This is due to differences in both communication and meeting logistics.

As such, don't try and hurry things. Allow things to take as long as they take and recognise the value in this.

It is also worth being cognizant of cultural differences in the approach to time. Some cultures have a far more flexible and fluid approach to time which may further extend events.

4 Embrace Uncertainty

When working across cultures, the differences in approach, values and working etiquette create a situation in which there is always a level of the unknown and the need for participants to act flexibly.

There are cultural differences in the degree to which individuals are direct or indirect in their communication. This difference also extends to the degree in which people are 'exact' in the way in which they work.

Take for example Germans, who are usually both direct in their speech (ie. they use verbal language to convey what they mean) and exact in their planning and execution. Someone from Saudi Arabi however, may be less direct in their speech as much of what they mean may be communicated in their body language as opposed to in their speech. Equally they may also have a high tolerance for uncertainty which is likely to manifest in the absence of definitive planning.

Your ability to navigate these differences and to appreciate uncertainty will certainly support you in your ventures.

5 Be Prepared and Go Early

We always recommend that if travelling to a new international target, that you travel at least two days before your meeting dates. Why? This allows you to acclimatise to the potential differences in climate, cuisine and time differences.

It also gives you the space to start forming an understanding of the local culture.

Ensuring that you are physically and mentally prepared will go a long way to get the most out of your subsequent meetings.

6 Build Your Intercultural Skills.

When working interculturally, it is important that you either engage in face to face training with intercultural experts, or, that you do as much research as you can on your own.

Read up on the way the target culture operates. What behaviours do they value? What behaviours might cause offense? How might you need to adapt your behaviours to gain cultural synergy?

Think also about your own culture. What behaviours do you value in the workplace? What behaviours are likely to irritate you or make you uncomfortable?

As a consequence of these exercises, map out the areas that you might need to be aware of and prepare for. If, for example, you are rigid in respect to timeliness and your international peers aren't, then think about the strategies you might need to use to manage this situation positively.

Above all, have fun. Intercultural exchanges are exciting, eye opening opportunities, which enable you to increase your skill base and learn from others. The more you travel, the greater your cultural skill base; enabling you navigate any situation - no matter how complex.

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