





Business Culture

Learn about the business culture in another country to have a positive impact on your export success.

Face-to-face connections are still valuable in this age of advanced technology and virtual connections. Before you hop on a plane, research the other country. Learn about their history, culture, customs, and business practices. It can be the difference between making and losing a sale, and can go a long way in making you stand out among the competition.

Some of the cultural differences U.S. companies often face involve the following: business styles, attitudes toward business relationships and punctuality, negotiating styles, gift-giving customs, greetings, significance of gestures, meanings of colors and numbers, and conventions regarding the use of titles.

For country-specific business culture information, read the [Country Commercial Guide](#).

Greetings and Business Card Tips

- Get to know proper use of names and titles. In many countries (including Denmark, France, and the United Kingdom), it is appropriate to use titles until use of first names is suggested. First names are seldom used by those doing business in Germany. Visiting business people should use the surname preceded by the title. Titles such as “Herr Direktor” are sometimes used to indicate prestige, status, and rank. In Thailand, however, people address one another by first names and reserve last names for very formal occasions and written communications. In Belgium, it is important to address French-speaking business contacts as “Monsieur” or “Madame,” whereas Flemish-speaking contacts should be addressed as “Mr.” or “Mrs.” To misuse these titles is a great faux pas.
- Use the appropriate greetings. When cultural lines are being crossed, something as simple as a greeting can be misunderstood. Traditional greetings include shaking hands, hugging, kissing, and placing the hands in praying position. The “wrong” greeting can lead to an awkward encounter.???
- Know business card protocol. Card giving is a key part of business protocol at the first meeting. In Japan, for example, the Western practice of accepting a business card and pocketing it immediately is considered rude. The proper approach is to carefully look at the card after accepting it, and acknowledge with a nod that the information has been digested, and perhaps make a relevant comment or ask a polite question. Also, prepare business cards that also have the language of the other country.
- Understand varied approaches to gift-giving customs. In some cultures such as Japan, gifts are expected, and failure to present them is considered an insult. In other countries, the presentation of a gift may be viewed as an offense. Find out whether there is a particular time to present a gift (such as on the initial visit or afterward); where to present the gift (in public or privately); what type of gift to present; and how many gifts are appropriate.??
- Speak a few words in your buyer’s native tongue. Your buyers or business associates will appreciate the effort. Words of welcome on your website, and maybe a currency converter, will further demonstrate your interest in doing international business.?

Building Contacts, Staffing?Up, and Negotiating??Tips

- Always answer queries politely and promptly. Don't delay when responding to e-mail, fax, and telephone requests for price lists, quotes, and other information. Build your own marketing list from the contacts. Ask for each customer's communication preferences. The query you ignore today might have been a source of future business.
- Get an intern or hire a new employee. As business develops with overseas customers, consider recruiting a student intern or recent college graduate who speaks the language and understands the business culture?
- Attend a trade show. Find one in your industry that's attended by foreign buyers. You can make good contacts—even sales—and test the waters before heading overseas. Also, consider attending an international trade show in your industry. U.S. embassies abroad often staff a national pavilion where U.S. sellers can meet foreign buyers.?
- Plan your negotiating strategy. Negotiating is more complicated in international transactions because of the potential for cultural misunderstandings. It is essential to understand the importance of rank in the other country, who the decision makers are, and the business style of the foreign company. Also, understand the nature of agreements there, and the significance of gestures and negotiating etiquette?.
- Start with what you know. Learn from your domestic customers. Apply cultural knowledge gained from people from different social and ethnic backgrounds than yourself.

Diverse Cultures and Different Concepts of Time??

- Be patient, few markets have a faster business pace than the United States; many are slower.
- Be aware of direct vs. casual business styles. In some countries, business people have a very direct style, while in others they are subtler. Personal relationships may be more valued than is customary in most U.S. business relationships. For example, in the Middle East, indulging in small talk before engaging in the business at hand is standard practice.?
- Take time to develop personal relationships. This is especially true with distributors or large-volume buyers. Remembering birthdays and other notable events is a good intercultural business practice. ?? ?? ? ?
- Find out the attitudes toward punctuality. For example, Romanians, Japanese, and Germans are very punctual, whereas people in many Latin countries have a more relaxed attitude toward time. The Japanese consider it rude to be late for a business meeting but acceptable—even fashionable—to be late for a social occasion. In Guatemala, though, people often arrive from 10 minutes early to 45 minutes late for a luncheon appointment.??