

“When in Rome” ...

Part 1

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do” is an old proverb but it still rings very true in today’s modern business environment. It is unfortunate fact that many business executives fail when they venture overseas in search of that lucrative international contract. Why do these people fail? Many times it is because they have neglected to address the important issues of cultural diversity involved in international business.

If we look at cultural diversity in a holistic manner, it encompasses everything from:-

- gender attitudes in business,
- business cards,
- gift giving,
- gestures, taboos, do’s & don’ts
- appointment making,
- introductions,
- networking,
- relationship building,
- protocols,
- dress,
- entertainment,
- dining etiquette,
- greetings,
- negotiation,
- symbols, superstitions, colours and numbers.

In this and future articles, you will see how the above issues highlight the difficulties and differences that can occur across cultures, in business.

Gender Attitudes in Business

Women are generally treated with courtesy and respect around the world. However in male dominated societies, it is very important for women to emphasise their authority. Dress can also be very important varying from societies expecting the highest standard in feminine dress fashions to conservative dress and even to the extreme where a woman may be expected to wear the traditional shawl partially or fully covering her face.

One thing does appear to be common within male dominated societies, a foreign woman generally has more freedom than the local women. However, never forget, there will still be limits

to what is acceptable behaviour from a woman and there can be misconceptions about sexual mores of “western women”.

Business Cards

Business cards are now recognised around the world. However, the use of them can vary significantly between cultures. How they are presented, what language should or should not be on them, what information is put on the card and how a given card is treated can in some instances clearly assist or severely jeopardise a business meeting.

For example, you would never ever write on a business card presented to you by a Japanese national (at least not in front of the person). Such behaviour would be insulting as would it be to quickly pocket the card without reading it or put it in a wallet that you put in your trouser back pocket. Both actions would also be insulting. Why? Because the Japanese that their business card is a reflection/statement of their standing within the company/society. To not study it and to treat it nonchalantly is quite insulting within the Japanese culture. The business card must be respected.

Gift Giving

To give a gift or not and what to give is very important, especially in some cultures. Other cultures may not expect any gift at all and to present one would be embarrassing to the receiver.

If gift giving is the business practice, it is important to realise that the gift is NOT a bribe. It is a personal “thank you” for the hospitality and courtesy extended for and during the meeting and in most cases, an important step in building a business and personal

relationship with your foreign counter-parts. Particular care must be taken in choosing a gift as it must be appropriate for the occasion and avoid the “wrong” type of gifts, eg. an unlucky number of items in the gift, too expensive, too cheap, the wrong colour, symbolically wrong, improperly wrapped or even improperly presented.

Whether you open the gift immediately or leave it unwrapped is another issue that can be important. Why? In some cultures, it is considered that by opening a gift in front of the presenter, you could inadvertently convey your displeasure for the gift chosen. Such behaviour would be extremely embarrassing for the receiver and very discourteous to the giver. Consequently, a potential bad situation is avoided by not opening the gift in front of you.

Gestures, Do's & Don'ts

Common do' and don'ts include, etiquette concerning removal of shoes, how you hand items to others, how women are treated, touching, giving criticism and showing emotion. Mos, if not all of the do's and don'ts simply about accepted local etiquette and showing respect to others. All this can be very confusing and misunderstood by those who have not bothered to study the culture they intend to work with.

For example, in many countries the left hand is considered “soiled” as it is used in personal toiletry. (This does not suggested hands are not washed)

Consequently, you do not hand anyone an item with the left hand as it is considered insulting to do so. If the item is heavy, eg. a large plate, you use both hands, preferably with the left hand underneath supporting the plate. Conversely, in other

countries, the etiquette in presenting someone an item involves using two hands. This can extend to little items such as business cards. This etiquette may also extend to passing a business report to someone. To simply toss a report across a table to a Japanese negotiator would be considered very poor manners and lack of respect for your potential business associate. Is this the type of attitude you wish to present?

Gestures can also be quite confusing and very often gestures can be interpreted as quite insulting either by the visitor or the locals. The typical two finger “salute” is only insulting in Australia and the United Kingdom. In all other parts of the world, the two finger gesture (shown either way) is interpreted as a sign of victory. So, you can readily understand how an insult can quickly occur if you have not studied the issue. There are many examples of such misunderstandings.

It is hoped that the examples discussed above provide some insight to the importance of studying a foreign business culture. Be also aware that this small article has only touch the tip of the iceberg. International experts all agree that time taken to understand a foreign culture will generally be rewarded many fold in helping establish and build a successful international business relationship. Such knowledge can be gathered in international marketing courses, commercial cultural reports and cultural training courses. ■

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