

“When in Rome” (Part 2)

Continuing on from Part 1 in the September Issue, we now explore the international cultural aspects of business in:-

- Appointment making
- Introductions
- Networking
- Relationship building

Appointment Making

As a general rule, make an appointment with the highest level of management possible. What level you are able to arrange an appointment with can depend very much on the type of society. For example, in a hierarchical society, eg. Thailand, who you know can count much more than what you know or what you can offer.

Always make your first point of contact at least one but preferably two months in advanced. In many cultures (East & West), an unannounced visit is considered rude and unwanted. If you do this, you have already penalised our chance of success before you start.

In your first letter or fax, it is essential that you clearly announce the specific nature of your visit. This allows the host to be suitably prepared when you arrive. A letter of introduction from a mutual colleague, friend or government agent will generally stand you in good stead. However, you will still have to demonstrate the benefits of any potential future business deal.

In some cultures, the first meeting may be over a lunch so be prepared to accept such a suggestion from the host. These luncheons can be low key with regard to business. However, it does provide the first opportunity for you to impress your host and start building the relationship between yourself and your host. This may be potentially enhanced by the choice of a favorable day for business, your knowledge about the country, dining etiquette and local culture. Conversely, in other cultures it may also be aided by the quality of your personal grooming, dress, civilised sophisticated behaviour and the etiquette you extend, eg. France.

Introductions

In Part 1 of this series of articles we mentioned some protocols concerning the business cards. When being introduced, the sequence of the introduction and the presentation of business cards can vary. In Germany for example, you present your business card after the introductions have been made. Elsewhere, you may hand out your card during the introductions.

Introductions can often be seen as the most confusing part of first doing business in another culture. However, they are important because first impressions really do count towards the business relationship you wish to establish. Some of the fundamental rules are:

- Always have a smile and friendly disposition.
- If you shake hands, do not give a "bone crushing" grip or conversely, a handshake like a "dead fish". Maintain eye contact when shaking hands but avoiding staring as it can be interpreted as an aggressive act.
- Use of the traditional bow or other local greeting gesture is acceptable if you do it right. Even with such gestures, you may still shake hands afterwards. Please note that a bow is not a sign of subservience but a sign of respect and greeting.
- Personal introductions should include titles and last (family) names rather than first names on the initial introductions. Australians, readily accept their first and last names used in introductions, whereas in other cultures, it would be considered disrespectful, especially for the senior executives.
- If a group is visiting, someone will be required to introduce people. Often this is the most senior person of the group who will introduce everyone after first introducing him or herself to the leader of the other side. Introductions are best performed in order of seniority, most senior first. Such behaviour is expected in many countries, eg. China.

Networking

Many people find the task of networking challenging. However, there is no doubt that networking can be enormously helpful, especially when you are embarking into the unknowns of an overseas business trip.

Well before leaving, learn about the business culture, the country, its people and the do's & don'ts. Also consider establishing contacts and seeking help from the following areas in your country: -

- Attend any Trade Fair organised by the country you are intending to visit.
- Contact your Government's equivalent to a "Department of Overseas Trade".
- Contact the commercial attaché at the embassy of the country you are visiting.
- Become a member of any appropriate business associations with overseas representatives and/or linked to the country you are intending to visit.
- Establish a relationship with an appropriate accountancy and/or legal firm that has international offices in the country you are visiting.

Once you have arrived in the country there are further points of networking you can use: -

- Your embassy, make contact with the resident Trade official(s).
- Local business organisations.
- If you have time, golf and tennis clubs can often provide some useful contacts.
- Establish an account with an international bank and introduce yourself to the local manager when you enter the country.
- Last but not least, the Yellow pages telephone book can be very useful.

In some countries there are specific network "facilitators/intermediaries", eg. China. These intermediaries have established business networks. In many countries, it is often not what you know but WHO you know if you want to achieve something in business effectively. These facilitators also assist in resolving procedural problems and provide advice on how best to

proceed through sometimes seemingly impenetrable bureaucracy. However take care, there are rogues about, so fully check credentials before engaging their services. If they complain about the checking of their credentials, be doubly suspicious.

Relationship Building

In many countries, business will not proceed unless the local business executive is happy with the relationship they have established with you.

Consequently, in countries such as Japan, business will proceed slowly until a satisfactory relationship is established. Do not expect one trip to be enough to complete a deal in such instances.

A relationship can mean many things, but generally the local company/people need to feel you are: -

- trustworthy,
- competent,
- you and your business are reliable,
- you have a regard to quality,
- prepared to accommodate the differences in culture,
- understanding about the way business proceeds locally, and finally,
- the type of person eg, socially, they would be happy about establishing a long term business deal with.

It is essential to realise that profit, although essential, is not the sole criteria in establishing a business deal in some countries. Conversely, in other countries, business can be based solely on the profit motive and consideration about whether they like you or not, is not necessary for doing business.

In our next article we will reveal some more aspects involved in improving your probability of success when doing business overseas. ■

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