

## “When in Rome” .... (Part 3)

In Part 2 we explored the international cultural aspects of appointment making, introductions, networking, relationship building. In this article: -

- **Dress,**
- **Entertainment,**
- **Dining etiquette.**

These issues may not seem important, but having some knowledge in this area will also help build that all important business relationship. Demonstrating that you have bothered to learn something about the culture of the country you are visiting cannot help to make a positive impression on your host to your benefit.

### Dress

Wherever you are, your clothing should always be clean, well pressed, tidy and preferably in a style that fits into the local culture. This does not necessarily mean you wear traditional clothes, but clothes that will make your host feel comfortable.

What to wear? This varies between countries and also within some countries. In the cities of mainland China, western style suits are common. However, wearing expensive clothing and expensive jewellery will often be regarded as being ostentatious and pressing home the differences in lifestyle and wealth between China and your country. This is particularly so in the rural areas. Conversely, in the rich region of Hong Kong, a tailored business dress would be highly regarded.

Women need to be particularly careful about the use of high heel shoes and low cut dresses. In Muslim and the rural areas of many countries, such clothes are not encouraged. Wearing such clothes can embarrass your host and can often result in a lot of staring that although harmless, can nevertheless be quite disturbing.

### Entertainment

When you are entertained, the golden rule is you must always reciprocate. You may not be able to do so immediately, but

on your return, don't forget to do it. In countries such as Australia, the USA and Canada, guests are often entertained within the private home of an executive. However, in places such as Japan, Vietnam and France, either potential embarrassment about the size and quality of a person's home or a strong concern for personal privacy generally dictates entertainment is held within a restaurant. Note: an invitation to a person's home is generally a very good indication that the business relationship is going well.

When you are entertaining, care must be taken in how and what you intend to serve. Many Asians are lactose intolerant, so milk products can be a problem. Other factors to consider include vegetarians, local religious dietary restrictions (Kosher, Halal, alcohol, etc). The locals may also not have a liking for some types of food from your country, eg. Malaysians generally do not like cheese; Chinese are not keen on lamb, etc.

How to hold the entertainment is another factor that can influence your guests. Buffet type meals are not common in some countries and sit down, multiple course meals are strongly preferred, eg. China. In other countries, a buffet style will be most appropriate, as your guests may arrive throughout the night and then only stay a short while before they trip off to some other place.

Who you should invite can vary to everyone involved (so no-one "loses face") to only the senior executives. In many countries, you need to invite everyone and then you have the concern about seating people in appropriate order of seniority. One hint for all such occasions is to alternate guests with your staff to help build upon the business relationship.

If you do go out, should you pay? Generally, the invitee pays but the local custom may require you to haggle over paying but finally and politely letting the other person pay.

Women may find a problem paying in countries where there is a strong machismo ethic amongst the males of society, i.e. allowing a woman to pay, even a senior executive, is not the honourable thing. In such countries, eg. Mexico, hold the meal in the hotel and have the bill added to your total hotel bill.

### Dining Etiquette

Etiquette associated with dining extends from the moment you arrive until you leave and even sometimes into the next day. You may be expected to arrive later than the nominated time (~ 20 minutes), or conversely, you may be expected to be very punctual. Contrary to both the above, other dining invitations allow guests to arrive at any time in the evening and then leave.

Custom may dictate you take a present for the host family or only for the host. Giving a present to the wife of the host can be considered insulting if approval for doing so has not been given by the husband first.

Taking a present of wine to a dinner party can be insulting or greeted with delight. To a Frenchman, he may think you are suggesting he does not provide wine of sufficient quality, to a Muslim it would be insulting to his faith. Whereas, to an English host, a present of wine would be very acceptable. Other types of presents such as flowers may be more appropriate (be careful about the number and/or type of flowers in the bouquet) or alternatively, a beautifully wrapped present may be best, eg. Japan.

Dinners may be preceded by hors d'oeuvres and drinks. Do you help yourself or wait for the hostess to offer them? Alternatively, you may go directly into the dinner after some small talk.

For a full formal type of dinner you may need to find your placename on the table or you may be directed to a specific chair by the host or hostess. Once seated, it could be bad manners to rest your hands in

your lap. As a rule, it is generally best to keep them above the table. In The Netherlands custom dictates that the host tells the guest when to start eating.

Toasts made may require you to clink your glass against everyone's else's so no-one is insulted. Often you are required to give a complimentary toast and possibly make a small speech. Sometimes, there are national drinks, eg. Tequila in Mexico, which have specific drinking rituals. For drinking Tequila, a pinch of salt is put on the back of the hand, then licked off in one motion followed by a drink of the Tequila which is then followed by sucking on a wedge of lime.

If you are entertaining or being entertained in a restaurant there are also specific aspects of restaurant etiquette, eg. taking or serving food from a dish, passing a dish around the table, etc. Calling a waiter or waitress done incorrectly, could unintentionally insult the staff that could lead to poor service, possibly jeopardising the success of the evening. For example, in Thailand calling a waiter/waitress, you say "nong". This actually means little brother/sister. One thing you do not do is raise your hand. That is considered to be impolite.

Hopefully the above will give you some insight to the somewhat subtle cultural intricacies that when you have the knowledge, you can employ to help establish and build a successful and long lasting business relationship. In our next article we will discuss the aspects of greetings, negotiation and finally symbols, superstitions, colours & numbers. Remember, individual detailed country business reports are obtainable from [buisnesstravelogue's](http://www.buisnesstravelogue.com) web site 24/7 and delivered within minutes to your desk. ■

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