

## “When in Rome” . . . . (Part 4)

*This last article in the series on international culture discusses the different aspects involved in greetings, the cultural differences in negotiation and the importance of being aware about local symbols, superstitions, the implications of colours and numbers.*

### Greetings

The first area of uncertainty that the foreigner may feel in a country is what to say, or do when meeting others? Generally the verbal greetings can be straightforward and easily learnt. However, whether or not to bow, shake hands, put your hands together in a prayer-like gesture (namaste), etc can be confusing for first timers. The western aspect of shaking hands as the international form of greeting on meeting has slowly been permeating into the many cultures of the world. However the traditional forms of welcome in a country are not going to be readily replaced by a handshake. What we often see is a mixture of the traditional forms of greetings and a handshake when "East meets West". However, although handshakes may be an acceptable and/or common form of greeting, whether a male shake hands with a woman can be an entirely different matter in many countries. A general "rule of thumb" is if the woman does not extend a hand, you do not shake hands.

It is also very important to understand that the bows, prayer like gestures and similar physical greeting gestures are very similar if not equivalent to a handshake. In fact, such gestures can in essence express a kinder and friendlier meaning of welcome than a handshake. For example, the common Hindi/Urdu greeting and farewell gesture is a namaste (or nawaskar). Used for greeting or a farewell, the palms of the hand are placed together and the tips of the fingers are chin high. It means, " I pay my respects to you". Muslim men may touch their heart with their hand after shaking hands and

this means "Your greeting is being conveyed to my heart" and is a sign of strong friendship. The Korean and Japanese bows are a form of showing respect for age, seniority and your position in society. The bow is performed before you shake hands.

Do you give a strong firm bone-crushing handshake or should it be just firm or a quite gentle handshake. This also varies between countries. A very gentle handshake in Australia would be regarded as portraying a weak person whereas it would be quite suitable for China.

The one unbreakable rule in all situations is that you should always accompany a handshake with a smile.

### Symbols, Superstitions, Colours And Numbers

A mistake in symbolism, ignorance of local beliefs, not understanding the local meaning of colour and numbers can very quickly lead to trouble. It can cause poor or no sales, in some rare cases riots have jeopardised the very existence of a business within a country!

A very common mistakes for a company entering a new foreign market is assuming that you can simply take a successful product logo, packaging, mottoes and marketing campaign directly from your country into another. Not so.

The portrayal of animals that the local culture considers, unlucky, death, unlucky, evil or morally unclean. Dogs are unclean in Muslim countries, three stripes in the shape of a "Y" or "U" distinguishes Shiva and Vishu worshippers in India.

Superstitions can become a problem due to local taboos and beliefs. For example, If you showed an advertisement in Thailand where the person enters a house by stepping on the doorsill, it would upset Thais. Many Thais believe spirits live in the doorsill and stepping on the doorsill will bring bad luck. Local superstitions may also mean it is wise to employ a

priest and/or numerologist in choosing the location of the business, blessing of your offices, choosing the most harmonious opening date and even consulting with you on the orientation and design of the building, etc.

Colours can similarly be a problem in packaging and marketing. What is a lucky or a "neutral" colour in one country can be associated with death in another. Black is associated with death in many countries but death is associated with white in India and both black and white are associated with death and mourning in Thailand. In China, gold is associated with wealth, but in Italy, gold is associated with funerals.

In a foreign country you may have to consider different packaging numbers, the numbers in your telephone number and your street address. All could imply either good luck, bad luck, evil, wealth, prosperity, happiness depending what they are and what country you are in. In Japan, odd numbers are lucky, except the number nine is considered unlucky as the sound of the word is like another word associated with bad luck. In Thailand any number associated with three is considered lucky, 9, 99, 999, etc. Consequently, a package of three items may be more preferable to Thais than a package of two items.

The lesson to learn from these examples is that you need to do your homework when planning to enter a new foreign market.

### Negotiation

The art of international negotiation has many factors associated with it in order to be successful. On the cultural aspect the most important is a level of understanding about how business has traditionally been concluded in the country. For example, the Western approach when there is a disagreement is to seek redress in the courts. To many cultures, particularly in Asia, such a course is insulting and foreign. A disagreement should be discussed between

parties to achieve a course of action that satisfies both parties. Furthermore, on a practical note, to seek redress in the local courts is often a very expensive, time consuming and futile exercise.

One very common area where many disagreements or misunderstandings arise in the first place is in the meaning of "Yes" given in negotiations. To a westerner, a direct question answered by "Yes" is agreement to the question. Not so in many cultures. You asked, " Will delivery be on time?" Answer "Yes". You subsequently find delivery is not on time. Understandably you are angry, but your foreign partner is does not understand why you are angry. He is however concerned that you are upset. You get angrier. What's happening? Well it all happened in the negotiations. Your foreign business partner answers "Yes" to your question. However, this simply meant he was listening to you; not an affirmation to your answer! Alternatively, he may have said "Yes" as the right answer "No" would have upset you. He "lied" because in his culture not revealing the truthful situation was the least "upsetting to you" in comparison to revealing the true situation. So in his culture, he was being the best host he could be to you!!!

This finishes our series of 4 articles on business culture. Our next article will discuss the non-cultural aspects of successful negotiation, be it an international deal of simply negotiating the local supply of a product. The skills revealed are simple and quite logical and can be easily mastered. Remember, detailed business reports are obtainable from our web site 24/7 and delivered within minutes to your desk. ■

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