

How to Handle Business Etiquette around the World

If You're Attending a Meeting

Respond promptly to any business meeting invitation you've received. Let the moderator know if you'll be able to attend, and be sure to read any materials he sent you. If you'll be making a presentation, prepare it as soon as possible. Mark the date and time of the meeting on your calendar and be sure to arrive on time -- early, if possible.

Turn off your cellphone as you enter the meeting room. Once the meeting has started, pay attention to what's being said. Don't interrupt, whisper to the person sitting next to you, or doodle. If you want to ask a question or make a comment, ask the moderator for permission and keep your words brief and on-topic. Professional meeting attendees let the moderator know that they're present in mind as well as body.

Conform to any plan or policy changes that were made at the meeting. Read any follow-up memo sent to you by the moderator and take whatever actions are required to implement decisions.

Table Etiquette

Cell phones, sunglasses, purses and electronic devices should not be placed on the table. Gently take your napkin from the table and place it in your lap after everyone is seated. Keep the napkin folded with the fold pointing to your waist. Also keep utensils in the same order they were arranged. Do not rearrange the layout because you are left-handed.

Ordering

Follow the lead of the host if you have doubts about what to order while avoiding the most expensive items. Make a simple selection and avoid finger foods such as buffalo wings or cheese nachos. The University of Toledo reports that you should not choose an item that "flips, slips, drips, squirts or splats." Generally avoid alcoholic beverages or limit yourself to one.

Eating

Wait for everyone to be served before starting your meal and if possible, pace yourself to finish at the same time as everyone else. Pass bread baskets clockwise and pass salt and pepper together. Never talk with your mouth full or stab the air with your fork to make a point during discussion. Wait for the proper time to excuse yourself from the table if you must take a break. A quick bathroom break between courses is acceptable, but you should not use the time to make phone calls or read email. When excusing yourself leave used silverware on your plate.

Posture

Throughout the meal sit up straight with your feet flat on the floor or legs crossed at the ankles. After the dinner is complete you may push back and cross your legs. Doing so during the dinner and cause slouching. Keep your hands in your lap while not in use and do not place elbows on the table. Do not use both hands to hold a utensil and a glass at the same time.

Finishing

Always thank the host but do not offer to pick up the tab if you were invited. Leave that to the host. If you are the host, accept the bill when it is presented and include a tip of 15 percent for moderate service, 20 percent for excellent service.

Timing

Avoid arriving late. If you are not going to be on time for a meeting, let someone know. Otherwise, people may wait for you indefinitely. Arrive five minutes early, except if it's held in someone's office as he may be preparing for the meeting or doing other work.

Enter the room quietly if arriving late is unavoidable.

Appearance

Appearance matters in most business meetings. Dress appropriately for the environment. If unsure, it is far better to appear overdressed. All clothing should be neat, clean and ironed. Avoid wearing excess perfume or cologne.

Lunch or Dinner Meetings

Good table manners are imperative. Place your napkin on your lap and wait for the waiter to serve everyone before beginning. Take small mouthfuls, eat at a moderate pace and keep your mouth clear of food when you are talking.

Look to your host and take cues from him if you are unsure of proper etiquette at any time.

Mobile phones

Inform the chairperson in advance if you have to take a call, put the phone on vibrate and sit by the exit. You can then quietly remove yourself from the room without overly distracting people.

Professional Conduct

Draw a strong line between the professional and personal. Even if you commonly address colleagues by first name, at a meeting it is appropriate to revert to formal titles. In addition, never bring up personal issues at a meeting.

Posture and Body Language

Sit straight in your chair with both feet on the ground, or crossed at the ankles. Avoid crossing your arms as this sends defensive signals. Keep your hands as relaxed and still as possible. Refrain from fidgeting with paper clips or rubber bands and avoid doodling on your note pad.

When Speaking

Speak clearly and loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear you. Plan what you would like to say before the meeting starts and be as concise as possible without rambling or repeating yourself.

Avoid confrontational language such as “You are wrong about this.” Instead say, “I disagree with you on this one” or “I have some different ideas about this issue.”

Seating

Ask where to sit if you are unsure. Don't sit at either end of the table. Avoid taking the chair next to the chairperson as this may be reserved for the person taking the minutes of the meeting.

Communication

Different languages and cultural traditions can be a serious barrier to communicating clearly with international customers. Get an interpreter if you do not speak the same language as your business contact, but learn a few key phrases in the person's language so you can offer your own greetings and well wishes. Address others formally, using honorifics and last names. Never assume that it is acceptable to use first names with international customers. Research the traditional greeting for the country you are dealing with and comply, whether this requires air kisses in France or a deep bow in Japan.

Attire

Dress professionally and modestly for international meetings. Women should opt for skirts that reach at least to the knee and wear hosiery. Men should wear well-tailored suits. Consider accessories such as a briefcase, portfolio and even writing utensils as extensions of your attire. Accessories should look professional. Don't pull out a spiral notebook and gnawed-on pencil to take notes because this could be seen as very disrespectful. Although international flights can be grueling, you may benefit from having maintained a professional look as you travel -- you never know what powerful connections you will make with others on your flight.

Preparation

Customs and etiquette vary so drastically internationally that the most important part of preparing for a meeting abroad is researching cultural mores. Prepare an agenda for your meeting and bring translated versions of any visual aids or literature you may need, even if your host speaks your language; this is considered a professional courtesy. Keep business cards with you at all times, as well. In many countries, such as Japan, the exchange of business cards is an important ritual. Present and accept cards with both hands and never write on another's card or casually tuck it into a pocket.

Northern Europe

Businesspersons here are known for their formality. When you first meet, shake hands with a firm grip and look them straight in the eye, Morrison recommends. Don't be surprised if they introduce themselves by their last name only and refer to you the same way. "They rarely like to use first names unless they know you personally," she adds.

Once introduced, skip the chitchat and get right down to business. "There usually is no conversation about personal lives or asking about hobbies," says Morrison. "They like to get to business very quickly and go step-by-step through contracts. Everything is usually done in a very orderly manner."

Lack of chitchat extends to elevators. Unlike the U.S. where deals can be done during a 10-second ride, elevators are kept silent in Northern Europe. "It comes down to sense of proximity and Northern Europeans don't like to be less than three feet from each other - it makes them uncomfortable," she says. "The informality of talking in an elevator is completely foreign to them."

Southern Europe

The opposite goes for Southern Europe. Here, businesspersons tend to be very chatty and will discuss personal interests...which can make things all the more comfortable for the U.S. traveler.

What isn't so comfortable, though, is the lack of regard for punctuality. "They are more likely to be late - could be five minutes, could be 30 minutes," Morrison says. Yes, this can be frustrating, but the best thing to do is to plan for it and try not to get upset.

Attire is very important to Southern Europeans. Make sure you invest in your clothing, but don't be flashy. "Don't wear an all red suit; wear something subtle and well put together," she says.

Eastern Europe and Russia

Consider hiring an interpreter when going to Eastern Europe because language can prove especially difficult.

“If you are in Hungary, for example, and your client doesn’t speak English, you need to get a really good interpreter, but remember that that person can only work for about two hours because the work is exhausting,” Morrison says. “Many high-level execs will prepare two interpreters and send information prior to the meeting to prep them - then switch them in the middle of the meeting to give one a break.”

Since Russia is the midst of an economic boom, there is an ever-expanding wealthy population. According to Morrison, businesspersons spend on items such as clothing and automobiles and like to converse about such things in the meeting room.

“They want to know where you are staying, what you are wearing, and what kind of car you drive,” she says. “They are also very tough negotiators and will test you. And like in Southern Europe, they can be late but expect you to be punctual. The trick is not to get upset because that shows weakness.”

Asia

When doing business in Asia, remember to keep your emotions hidden. “The concept of harmony is very important in Asian cultures and you are disturbing that if you show your emotions - make sure to keep a poker face,” advises Morrison.

Relationships are integral to business in Asia. “Most people will work with those that they know, trust, or are related to,” she says.

So how can business owners develop trusted relationships?

“Contact world trade centers and ask them for contacts; you can also contact embassies and consulates for introductions to people in various locations to help you get an ‘in,’” she says.

When deciding on a wardrobe, stay away from bright colors. “Certain colors were once reserved for royalty such as yellow for the Emperor of China,” says Morrison. “If you are working with senior businesspersons, stay away from a yellow tie.”