

The cultural advantage

The importance of culture within international business

Protocol. It's a very visible aspect of international politics, as heads of state meet, usually on one or other's home ground, to discuss matters of gravity and mutual importance. A single – seemingly minor – error, perhaps in the manner of greeting or choice of gift, can damage a relationship irreparably and, worse still, be broadcast widely – even globally – in the media.



International business

Although, in the case of international business, meetings are less likely to be open to the public gaze, the same principles apply. However large a company is, its success in creating strong and long-lasting relationships with customers in foreign countries hinges critically on an understanding of the business culture in those countries: the way that business partners should interact, and what is considered respectful or disrespectful in both commercial dealings and personal relationships.



The cultures of trading nations remain steadfastly different

As travel becomes ever faster and most modes of communication are effectively instant, it's easy to think of the 'Global Village' as a marketplace where everyone behaves in the same way, follows the same business etiquette and has the same outlook. But the truth is that, although we certainly do live in a world that offers vast opportunities for trade, the cultures of trading nations remain steadfastly different. And 'amen' to that: how tedious it would be if we all behaved in exactly the same way.

Research, observation and diplomacy

The key to putting your counterparty at ease, and thus improving your opportunities to cultivate the business relationship, is a combination of research, observation and diplomacy.

Researching your potential customers and their markets is of course essential, not just to understand the way they do business, but also to adapt your products and services accordingly.

And over-generalisations such as "we're moving our focus to Asia" can be a big mistake, as these will miss the subtle nuances within specific countries.

While travelling, take note of how people act, dress and behave towards each other in different countries: it's often all too easy to be wrapped up in our own concerns to notice what's going on around us. Observation can help you to improve your ability to mirror your business contacts – and thus create a genuine rapport.

In business meetings, be tactful and appreciative of your counterparty's circumstances - and avoid comparisons, whether spoken or simply thought, with your own country. Moreover, the phrase 'lost in translation' has been the ruin of many a business relationship at the starting post, so a well-chosen translator can be a real asset in meetings. But remember to look at and talk directly to your opposite number, not the translator.

There's no sure-fire way to ensure a successful international business deal, but adhering to these principles will certainly aid your endeavours.

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