

Improving your personal effectiveness with international audiences

Keys to Success: The Basics

Listen! Watch! Observance is the most effective communications skill of all. If you're in doubt about the proper protocol, watch closely for nonverbal cues, which may be subtle. If you're confused, it's usually better to ask than to assume you've guessed it right.

Learn the languages (at least a few key phrases): Don't be daunted if your accent isn't impeccable. Your guests/hosts will appreciate any attempt to meet them halfway. Start with the basics (hello, thank you, excuse me, good morning/evening) and build from there.

Know your audience--beforehand: Take the time to understand important cultural factors that may affect your business or personal relationships. Among the ways you can collect information:

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- ◆ Talk to those who have been there, or who are natives of that country
 - ◆ Pick up a language book
 - ◆ Read a historical novel of the region/area
 - ◆ Rent some videotapes (preferably recent films popular in the local country)
 - ◆ Scan the local newspapers/magazines to get a feel for noteworthy current events, cultural values, and possible topics of conversation.
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Also take the time to familiarize yourself with the status/rank, level of influence, educational background, relationship to others, and other important characteristics of as many key people as possible. It's always helpful to learn as much in advance, to avoid potential embarrassments later.

Appearance, dress: Make sure you're familiar with the accepted conventions. If you're not sure, it's best to err on the conservative side. For men, this usually

means a dark suit and tie, and a white or off-white shirt. For women, a suit is best (except in many European countries, where a dress and jacket are well-accepted).

Punctuality: Most Northern European countries place great value on being on time, especially for business meetings. (Latin-based cultures are considerably more forgiving if you show up a few minutes late.) If you're not absolutely sure where you are going, how to get there, or how long it will take, practice your route the day before, if possible-- especially if you're likely to run into rush hour traffic en route to your meeting.

Relationship-Building: Tips & Techniques

Introductions and formalities: Because there are as many variables associated with introductions and other formalities as there are countries of the world, take the time to learn the preferred customs.

Never assume that first names will be warmly received, unless you've cleared it in advance. In most countries of the world, first names are not used until a good relationship has been established. (And even then, you should wait until you are told to take that liberty!)

Make sure you're familiar with the correct (preferred) title. For example, PhDs in most other countries of the world go by "Doctor" (or Herr Doktor), versus Mr., Miss, or Mrs. (or Herr, Frau or Fraulein). Similarly, occupational designations, such as "Professor" are often used in place of, or in addition to, Mr., Ms., Mrs.

In most cases, a handshake is welcome, the firmness depending on the locale. In Germany, a firm grip is standard, whereas in France a lighter grip is the norm. (In some cases, such as in Germany, handshakes begin and end every working day, even with colleagues from the same organization. Take the time to know when, how often, and with whom handshakes and other greetings should be used.)

The art of "small talk": In some cultures, "small talk" is essential for building a trusting relationship. Some, such as Southern Europeans, Latin Americans and Asians, find it imperative to get to know their business associates on a level other than business, before a solid foundation may be built. Others, such as Northern Europeans and Americans, often find such "chit chat" to be unnecessary and distracting to the business at hand. Know the difference, and be prepared to either indulge in small talk, or skip it altogether.

Use (or non-use!) of humor: When in doubt, *don't!* Many Americans are fond of opening their presentations or meetings with some light humor, as an ice-breaker, or a way to defuse tension. Humor has little place in business settings in many parts of the world. (And even when it does, it's critical to know what kind of humor is best employed, and what topics are best avoided.) If you feel compelled to add a bit of humor to your presentation, check with a local colleague to make absolutely sure it will have the intended effect.

Can You Put That In Writing?

Among most Northern European countries and in the U.S, business people look for extensive documentation loaded with details, facts and figures. In other European countries, such as France, meticulous documentation may be considered overkill. Corporate norms also will affect the frequency, content, and details expected for written communication.

Here are some general tips:

- **Test for possible interpretations:** Before you send out that important document, ask someone fluent in the business language of that country to check the meaning against your intended meaning
- **Formal vs. informal:** This will vary according to both country and corporate culture. Make sure you understand the accepted norms, and tailor your correspondence accordingly.
- **Speed of response required:** Your response time can set the tone for the relationship to come, especially if your first communications are in written form. Be prompt, be thorough, and be clear in your responses, especially if the recipient is not fluent in your language.
- **Watch out for currency denominations, dates, other confusing terms** that differ from region to region:
 - ☑ If you're using U.S. dollars, say so; many other countries of the world use dollars, too (such as Australia, Hong Kong, and Canada). People in most countries would prefer a translation to their own currency, as well.
 - ☑ Dates are often written differently than we are used to seeing them. In many countries, October 2, 2009 would be written as 2 October 2009, or abbreviated as 2/10/09. Make sure you know which convention is being applied. It's best to spell out the month in your correspondence, lest you cause unnecessary confusion that could mean major problems later on.

Making Yourself Perfectly Clear

Clear speech: Enunciate clearly. Many accents are difficult for non-native speakers to follow. (See *The International Business Book* by Vincent Guy and John Mattock for their glossary to “Overseas English,” which compares American and English to the style of English learned overseas.)

Speak slowly (not loudly!): Just because your audience doesn’t speak fluent English, it doesn’t mean they are hearing-impaired! Take the time to emphasize key syllables, and leave plenty of pauses so your audience can do the mental translation back into their own language. Don’t be afraid to check in with them from time to time as to your pace.

Simplicity: The KISS principle applies in most other countries, where elegance and a clear sense of the “big picture” is more valued than a mass of details (except in Germany, where details are paramount). Avoid compound sentences or elaborate statements. Parcel out your ideas in bite-sized pieces that can be easily digested and assimilated.

Active verbs: Use as many as possible to convey your meaning. Passive sentences tend to confuse and dilute meaning. Avoid “get,” which means nothing and everything in “Overseas English.”

Paraphrase: A useful technique to check if your meaning has been properly conveyed, without embarrassing yourself or your audience. If you see a sea of blank faces stare back at you, try paraphrasing your main points, using different words.

Avoid acronyms and idioms: We tend to pepper our speech with idioms and allegories that are well-understood in our own countries, but may be utterly confusing to someone from another country. In the U.S., sports allegories have widely infiltrated our everyday speech, often unconsciously. Consider the phrases so commonly used in the U.S., such as “out in left field,” “the whole nine yards,” and “full court press.” Imagine the confusion of an audience whose major sports do not include baseball, basketball, or American football!

As much as possible, local idioms and trendy business buzzwords should be avoided. What’s a widely embraced term in one country may only cause confusion in another. Because even the most seemingly innocuous words and phrases from your own country may have different--and sometimes unintentionally rude--

meanings in another, it's best to double-check both spoken and written words with a resident of the targeted country.

Making eye contact: How intensely, and how frequently, you should make eye contact will depend on your audience. In the U.S. and most European cultures, for example, making direct eye contact shows you are interested and earnest. While the French may gaze more intensely than the Germans, Americans tend to dart their eyes back and forth while maintaining contact. In certain Asian cultures, direct eye contact may be considered invasive and rude.

Use of gestures, animation: A perfectly proper gesture in one country may be considered unspeakably rude in another. Consider the infamous example of U.S. President George H. Bush on a visit to Australia, when he jubilantly flashed what *he* considered to be the “V” for victory hand signal in front of hundreds of press cameras. (Regrettably, he did not know that Australians considered the very same signal to mean something so vulgar that most would never use it in public.) Use hand signals only when you are absolutely certain these will not be misinterpreted by their audience.

Some cultures appreciate energetic gesticulations, while others may find them distracting or inappropriate for business presentations. If you're in doubt, try to keep hand movements to a minimum.

Design of Presentations:

“Bite-sized” pieces with frequent breaks: Whether you're using an interpreter, or going it alone, allow plenty of extra time to present to non-native-speaking audiences. You'll be speaking more slowly than usual, paraphrasing to check for meanings, and giving your audience time to do the mental translations. A good rule of thumb: plan to spend about 50-100% more time than you would to an English-speaking audience.

Allow for frequent breaks, if you're presenting for a half-day or so. Translation is mentally exhausting; your audience will need time to refresh their minds.

Visual Aids: Be sure that any visual aids reflect a sensitivity to the local culture. One U.S. client I worked with used a basketball hoop as his central metaphor throughout an entire slide presentation that he intended to use around the world. He got as far as Canada, when he realized that basketball analogies had little relevance outside of the U.S. Another client wanted to show the Statue of Liberty

as “universal symbol of freedom,” until it dawned on him that for people outside of the U.S., the statue may hold no such symbolism.

While slides shouldn’t be cluttered with a lot of text, they *should* contain *some* brief text to amplify your points. Non-English speaking audiences will appreciate the ability to verify that what they *think* they’ve heard you say is in fact what you meant to say. Many people find it easier to follow the written word than the spoken word. Provide them with both, augmented by graphics that convey your primary messages with simplicity and clarity.

Seating arrangements: Determining the most suitable seating arrangements depends on a variety of factors, including formality of your presentation; composition of audience, especially in regard to hierarchy; anticipation of audience interaction; and cultural preferences. In France, for example, a senior-ranking manager would probably prefer to be seated amidst other participants, where in Germany, the top manager may prefer to be honored at the head of the table. If you can influence the seating arrangement, be sure to check with someone familiar with the culture before you make arrangements.

Level of interaction: You may find yourself being interrupted by a steady flow of challenging questions or philosophical disagreements in France, whereas in Korea, the most interaction you might receive from your audience is a barely imperceptible nod. When you’re creating your presentation, and planning your time accordingly, think about how you’d like your audience to interact, and what you can reasonably expect, given the culture.

Many presenters like to lace their presentations with questions--or challenges-- to the audience. Be prepared to forego your usual style, if the norms of the local culture don’t call for a high level of interaction between presenters and audience members.

To sum it all up: Most audiences will look for your major points to be re-stated at the end of your presentation. Don’t disappoint them; make sure you clearly convey your key points at the end, even if it is the third or fourth time you have made these same points.

Hand-outs: Even if your audience may not appreciate fine shades of details during your presentation, they may want back-up details in writing, especially if your subject is highly-technical. Make sure to bring plenty of hand-outs, and use your judgment as to when you should pass them out.