

Doing Business in Britain

The British are a proud and noble people steeped in the ways of their traditions and loyal to their past. They have a tremendous sense of history and pay homage to it daily in the ways they engage in social interaction and business. To the British the events of today are seen through the eyes of hundreds (perhaps thousands) of years. They have the discipline and culture to reinforce existing convention.

Along with this commitment to tradition comes a resistance to change. The British do not like when things move ahead so quickly they lose a sense of control or the ability to consider (and sometimes measure) how the change is affecting the way they normally do things. This should not be taken to mean that the British are against change or will resist technology or innovations. It does mean, however, that they will approach these new developments with a caution that others (like the Italians and the Germans for example) would not.

The tight structure of British society translates into a carrying on of some aspects of older times, such as the class system. While the barriers to the lower classes have somewhat broken down, it would not be entirely correct to state that the upper class has been integrated with the newly wealthy and successful. Money is not the sole criteria for status in Britain, and this is important to understand when doing business there.

The British have an ambiguous relationship with Europe. While they don't necessarily consider themselves part of Europe, they do appreciate the potential of the European Union and the economic benefits it can bring.

Understanding the British

The British are not as complex as some others because they are very straight forward, and to some extent, predictable. This does not mean that they are incapable of innovation or surprise moves or should be underestimated. They will rise to the occasion and do what they need to do to win – and they like to win.

There is a no emotion in the way the British approach business. They are highly analytical and skilled in abstract thinking. They accept only objective facts as the basis for dialogue and review the facts from their understanding of the circumstances. It is very rare that they let their own opinions or feelings influence the way they view a situation.

Once they have taken a position, it is extremely difficult to move them. They believe they have taken the time to formulate a considered opinion and the effort to counter their conclusion can be arduous.

The British like to feel that they are approaching business from a point of fairness and they are interested in deals that can be demonstrated to benefit both sides (although not necessarily equally). They are savvy enough business executives to understand what motivates a party to comply with conditions and meet promises.

Conducting Business with the British

The British are exceedingly polite. While they have no problem saying no to a proposition they are not interested in, they may do so in such a subtle way that you will not realize you have been turned down. You may need to state your understanding just to make sure that you heard what they actually said.

There is an established rule for everything and the British are very loyal to their rules. While they will not always let the rule block progress, they will need a good reason to make an exception. The rules are there because they serve a purpose and you will need to show that the purpose is not served under the particular circumstances.

It is very unlikely you will ever see displays of emotion during the negotiating process and even as business moves forward. Regardless of how exciting or tense the situation becomes, your British counterpart will most likely remain stoic.

The British are very time sensitive. They do not appreciate tardiness and will hold repeated delays against you. Similarly, they are also results oriented and will need to see that you do the things you promise to do. Again, if you for whatever reason fail to meet your commitments they will hold this against you, regardless of the validity of your excuses.

When seeking an introduction to a British executive, it is best to try to find a mutual third party to make the introduction. They are not particularly receptive to cold calls.

Do's and Don'ts in Britain

Make sure you schedule meetings ahead of time and confirm the day prior. The British are not ones to engage in a drop-by or impromptu meeting. If you want them to be able to decide and do business you need to give them time to prepare.

When making a presentation do not try to hard sell or exaggerate your claims. The hard sell will cause them to shut you out immediately, and the exaggerated claims will call doubt to everything else you say.

British humor can be self-deprecating. This is not an invitation for you to express an opinion or agree. They are sensitive to what they see as condescending behavior. Be sure you don't do anything that gives them a sense you see yourself as somehow better than them.

If you do wind up getting together with them after work hours for dinner or drinks do not bring up business unless they do. They most likely see this time as an opportunity to engage in some light socializing and it would be rude if you are all business. The desire to socialize with you does not mean they are interested in discussing religion, politics, or even their personal lives. It is best to keep the conversation to more general topics like sports or entertainment, unless they initiate a more serious subject

Britain is a country with a solid history of business excellence. The British have demonstrated that they can be trusted and will meet all their promises with excellence. The somewhat rigid structure they impose on their business dealings is no different than the rules they elect to live by in their personal lives. You may not always agree or appreciate it, but you have to respect it. It isn't every country that can claim the kind of history Great Britain can.

