

Knowing Americans for Better Business Interactions

The United States has a long history of partnership and friendship with many nations around the world. In the political, military and business arenas these countries cooperate with the United States to the mutual benefit of both sides.

On the business front, these close relationships have led some non-Americans to assume that their respective people and Americans are similar in culture, worldview and business practice. This in turn has led some to assume a casual, almost too-friendly posture when approaching US businessmen.

Yet there are tremendous differences in the way Americans and others do business, how they view the world and the customs they embrace. Just as most businesspeople are aware of the need to adjust their behavior on a business mission to Japan, so too must they make adjustments when in the United States. The fact that these differences are less apparent does not make them less urgent, or conforming less necessary.

Tudog has engaged in the process of assisting a number of non-U.S. companies to enter the US market. During the course of our efforts we have been ideally positioned to observe where the differences are and how misunderstandings are created. Below we share what we have learned:

- **Bad Impressions** - Many non-Americans go into the U.S. market with the misconception of Americans as naïve, slightly simpleminded and easy to fool. This is erroneous to the point of disastrous. Americans built the richest nation in the world. Assume at least some of them know what they're doing.
- **Manners** - Americans adhere to a strict code of behavior that includes allegiance to certain courtesies and politeness. Some non-Americans see this as being stiff or too formal. Judgments aside, success in the U.S. means showing courtesy, being polite, and adhering to these rules of behavior.
- **Your Nation as a Top News Item** - some Americans may be very aware of events in your country, but generally Americans are unaware of the minute details of events beyond the US border. This should not be taken as an insult, and certainly should not be seen as an indication of their intelligence. American businessmen are intelligent and well versed in topics they elect to know. Your country simply may not be one of them.
- **Small Talk** - Americans engage in small talk prior to getting down to business. Some non-Americans may see this as corny and are then thrown off track when the business process begins and the Americans prove to be extremely committed to their own business interests. Being friendly is not intended to negate their right to pursue their own interests. It is intended to make the environment more civil and conducive to doing business.
- **Go with the Process** - Regardless of the process of negotiations, American businesses are highly structured and have "rules" for practically all scenarios. They obey these "rules" and will not violate them in the interest of closing a deal.

Similarly, American businesses rely on experts at every level of the enterprise. Be certain not to make claims that can be challenged for accuracy.

- **Create Credibility** - It is important to create credibility, which is earned through expertise and accuracy. Don't make assumptions or guess when asked a question. It's better to say that you'll look into it and get back to them. Then make yourself a note of the question and make sure you get back to them with the answer. They really will be waiting to hear from you.
- **Compromise** - American view negotiations as problem solving through give and take. They expect compromise, based on respective strengths. You can't go into a meeting with only one position.
- **The Aggressive American** - Americans can be blunt and aggressively disagree with you. In this circumstance you need to find the way to steer the conversation away from the point of disagreement without backing down. If you are wrong, you can say that you see their point and move to another topic. If you are right, say that you have some supporting evidence you will send them to better emphasize what you mean. Then move on to the next issue.
- **Silence isn't Always Golden** - Americans don't like extended periods of silence during a business discussion. When asked a question it is best to answer without pausing. A long pause after questions, particularly about your business, leads Americans to think that you are either positioning your answers or, perhaps even making them up. Never give an answer that is untrue. If the relationship proceeds they will discover the exaggeration or falsehood and hold it against you.
- **Competition** - Americans are very competitive. Don't get into situations where the competition is unhealthy.
- **Why Can't We Be Friends** - Americans are seemingly casual and on a first name basis. Be careful to recognize the limits of the casual environment and not slip into an overly friendly mode. There is a difference in the U.S. between being friendly and being friends.

The U.S. market offers non-U.S. companies tremendous opportunity. Without judgment, it is important to recognize that there are cultural differences that could lead to misunderstandings and missed opportunities if they are not understood and neutralized. So come to the U.S. with an open mind, ambition, dreams and a healthy supply of flexibility.