

Communication Skills Needed For Successful Interactions With America's Largest Trading Partners

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Abstract

To compete successfully in the international arena, U.S. companies conducting business abroad should arm themselves with knowledge of the communication customs of people of other cultures, especially America's top trading partners. Communication skills that are highly visible during intercultural encounters include greetings, introductions, and business cards; conversational customs; dining and tipping; dress and appearance; and nonverbal communication. Suggestions for classroom activities teachers may use to integrate intercultural communication skills into various business courses are included in the paper.

Introduction

Successful interactions with people of other cultures involve knowledge of communication skills to avoid inadvertently offending them during intercultural encounters. These encounters are becoming more frequent with the increased globalization of business and the multiethnic composition of the U.S. workforce as well as university populations. Furthermore, international travel is on the rise resulting in more cross-cultural interactions. To compete successfully in the international arena, companies conducting business abroad should arm themselves with knowledge of the communication customs of people of other cultures, especially customs of countries with whom the United States conducts a majority of its international trade, to assure that interactions are positive and productive (Chaney & Martin, 2007; Martin & Chaney, 2009).

Many countries are used as examples in this paper to show the wide range of differences that exist in the world. The U.S. Census Bureau (2007) information is a prime source of data. Those who are interested in a specific country may wish to visit the website for the U.S. Census Bureau or consult the authors' books, *Passport to Success* or *Global Business Etiquette*; these sources will provide extensive information on the top trading partners of the United States. One of the main objectives interculturalists have is to educate people on the importance of being observant and tolerant of the different ways of living around the world and understanding that cultures are constantly changing. Further, realizing that people within cultures are not exactly the same is important as well.

Communication Skills Needed for Successful Intercultural Encounters

The communication skills that are highly visible during intercultural encounters include greetings, introductions, and business cards; conversational customs; dining and tipping; dress and appearance;

and nonverbal communication. A *faux pas* during greetings and conversations can result in personal and professional embarrassment. Even using inappropriate table manners, wearing improper attire, or using gestures with negative connotations may not only cause discomfort but may be sufficiently serious to lose a contract or to close the door to conducting business in the future (Martin & Chaney, 2009).

Greetings, Introductions, and Business Cards

First impressions are especially important between people of different cultures. Impressions are quickly formed by the way people greet each other, by how they make introductions, and how they exchange business cards.

Ritualistic greetings, though common in the United States, are not the norm in many cultures. The typical U.S. greeting of “Good morning, how are you?” is not actually an inquiry regarding the other person’s well being in the United States. This greeting is confusing to people in some cultures who, when they make this inquiry, are sincerely interested in how the other person is doing. An Israeli woman expressed her confusion at this ritual; she could not understand why a person would be expected to smile and say that everything was fine even though perhaps this person had just experienced some personal misfortune, such as bankruptcy, divorce, or children who are on drugs (Bosrock, 1999). People in Mexico, on the other hand, expect to learn how the other person is doing when they ask “How are you?” In addition, they would also ask about family and would typically hug each other during greetings. In France, an air kiss next to the cheek can be expected. People of China and Japan, on the other hand, prefer to avoid touching during greetings (Chaney & Martin, 2007).

Both men and women stand during introductions. In the United States, the name of the person with the highest rank is mentioned first; age and gender are no longer considerations. Because of differences that exist between cultures in the use of titles and first or last names during introductions, it is advisable to ask about the correct procedure (Martin & Chaney, 2006).

Handshakes often accompany greetings and vary from the firm shake of people in the United States and Germany to the gentle handshake of people from England, France, and Asian countries. Although the Chinese and Japanese usually bow during greetings, they often shake hands when meeting people from the West. During business encounters, it is not unusual for all parties to bow and shake hands out of respect for the customs of both bowing and nonbowing cultures (Chaney & Martin, 2007).

Exchanging business cards is an expected part of business introductions in most countries so knowing cultural variations in their use is important. In the United States business cards are exchanged only when there is a reason to contact the person later. In Japan and Taiwan, on the other hand, business cards are routinely exchanged in business settings; they are examined carefully before placing them in a cardholder. The cards are presented and received using both hands; the card is positioned so that the person receiving the card can read it (Axtell, 1993; Baldrige, 1993). While exchanging business cards is the norm in the Middle East, the Pacific, Asia, and the Caribbean, Australians do not typically carry business cards and may not offer one when a foreign businessperson offers his or her card. In Latin American countries, business titles should be included on business cards (Moran, Harris, & Moran, 2007). In most of the countries of Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East (except for Israel), presenting the card with the left hand is to be avoided as the left hand is reserved for taking care of bodily functions (Axtell, 1993). Prior to visiting non-English speaking countries, it is advisable to have

business card information printed in English on one side and in the local language on the other (Martin & Chaney, 2006).

Conversational Customs

Conversations may be substantive or nonsubstantive. Substantive conversations involve an exchange of information and thoughts; nonsubstantive verbal interactions include light conversation that may occur at social events, during the initial stages of negotiations, or before getting down to business during meetings. Both types of verbal exchange are important when building a relationship with business colleagues from other cultures.

Substantive verbal interactions may take the form of repartee, ritual conversation, verbal dueling, and self-disclosure. People of the United States prefer repartee, a form of verbal interaction that involves people taking turns speaking. Each person speaks a sentence or two before giving another person a chance to speak. In contrast, people from the Middle Eastern countries do not take turns and often speak for extended periods. Ritual conversation involves standard comments in a given situation, such as the typical U.S. greeting of “Good morning; how are you?” and the expected reply of “Fine thanks; how are you?” During ritual conversations, Latin Americans often discuss health issues, a topic considered inappropriate for U.S. conversations. Verbal dueling or argument is another form of verbal interaction that is usually avoided by U.S. persons because they feel that arguing may have a negative impact on the relationship (except for U.S. men who argue about whose sports team is superior). Politics, though an inappropriate topic for verbal dueling in the United States, is appropriate in England, France, and Germany. Self-disclosure involves the amount of information people are willing to share with others. U.S. persons reveal little personal information to others (Martin & Chaney, 2006).

Nonsubstantive conversations are known as small talk or chitchat; they are an important part of getting to know someone in many cultures. People of the United States, who have been called masters of the art of chitchat, can talk endlessly about such nonsubstantive topics as the weather, favorite restaurants or movies, the physical surroundings, the day’s news, or good restaurants. Australians, the British, Canadians, the French, Mexicans, Peruvians, and Argentineans also excel at small talk. In some countries, on the other hand, people are not skillful at small talk. These countries include Finland, Germany, Japan, and Sweden (Lewis, 2006). Topics considered appropriate or inappropriate for light conversation also vary by country. While in the United States, South Africa, and in most countries of Europe, it is unacceptable to ask such personal questions as age and salary, people of China and South Korea consider such questions appropriate. In Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan, asking a man about his wife is inappropriate. In addition to personal questions, avoid discussions of religion and politics, not only in the United States, but in Australia, New Zealand, and Latin America as well. Other topics to avoid in specific countries include ethnic differences in South Africa, the Falklands War in Great Britain, World War II in Germany and Japan, border violations in Mexico, and drug policies or terrorism in Bolivia and Colombia. Appropriate topics for chitchat in most countries include art, books, culture, history, music, sports, travel experiences, and the weather (Baldrige, 1993; Braganti & Devine, 1992; Chaney & Martin, 2007; Devine & Braganti, 1995, 1998, 2000).

The best advice during intercultural conversations is probably to avoid discussing politics or religion or asking personal questions, unless the other person initiates the discussion. Being a good listener, avoiding culture-sensitive topics, and keeping informed on a variety of topics are good rules to follow when conversing with someone from another culture (Chaney & Martin, 2007).

Dining and Tipping

Since intercultural business and social encounters often involve dining, an awareness of cultural variations in styles of eating, as well as food customs, is important. In addition, tipping behavior is important since people communicate such qualities as generosity (or a lack of it) by how much they tip. Sometimes a person from one culture may inadvertently offend someone from another culture by tipping in a no tipping culture (Chaney & Martin, 2007).

Styles of eating vary from the American zigzag style to the Continental or European style used in Europe, Latin America, and many other countries. Knives and forks are used in both eating styles. In the American zigzag style, the knife is held in the right hand and the fork in the left with the tines down while cutting a piece of food; then the knife is placed on the upper right edge of the plate. The fork is switched to the right hand, and the food is eaten with the fork tines up. When using the Continental or European style, the fork remains in the left hand with the tines down during the cutting and eating of food. In addition to these styles of eating, other styles involve using the fingers on the right hand to eat from a single serving container. People of the Middle East and India, as well as some Filipinos, use the right hand for scooping food; refusing to join in this manner of eating would be insulting. In countries where knives, forks, and spoons are atypical, such as China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Vietnam, chopsticks are commonly used. Because specific rules govern proper use of chopsticks, it is a good idea to research chopstick etiquette or to ask for advice from the host nationals who are usually quite happy to provide visitors instructions on their proper use (Martin & Chaney, 2006).

Most cultures consume at least some foods that are viewed as unusual by people in other cultures. One U.S. food considered unusual by people in other cultures is corn on the cob (food for animals only in many countries). Marshmallows, popcorn, grits, and crawfish are additional foods viewed with surprise by people in other cultures (Axtell, 1993). Foods eaten by people in other countries that are less than appetizing to U.S. persons include sea slugs in Hong Kong, sheep's eyeballs in Saudi Arabia, and dog meat in South Korea. In China, duck's feet may be served; in Mexico, a chicken's foot may be served in chicken soup. Since eating what is offered is expected, it is important to become familiar with special foods of the country to avoid being surprised and making negative remarks about the food customs (Chaney & Martin, 2007). While in some countries, such as South Korea, you may see some people eating with their mouths open or slurping their soup as a sign that the soup is good, most countries will have the rule of chewing with the mouth closed. Another custom that is acceptable is blowing the nose at the table, which is not proper in the United States as well as in South Korea and many other countries, where people are expected to excuse themselves from the table to use a tissue.

Tipping is the norm in many countries; this is especially true in the United States and Canada. When the service is good, a tip of 20 percent is expected in fine restaurants. In modest restaurants, a tip of 15 percent is considered acceptable. The tip is included in the bill in many European countries, in Latin America, and in some Asian countries, including South Korea and Taiwan. However, many servers appreciate an additional amount when they give good service. Tipping is not expected in Japan and China. Because tipping customs vary, it is advisable to ask the host nationals about local tipping customs (Lewis, 2006). In Mexico the tip is not included in the bill; however, many times visitors think the tax that is included is the tip.

Dress and Appearance

Dress and appearance are important in intercultural encounters because of the link between attire and credibility, competence, and respect for others and for the occasion. According to Seitz (2000), “appearance constitutes 55 percent of the first impression we make on others” (p. 36); clothing communicates both positive and negative impressions about people and the companies they represent.

The general rule for business attire in all countries is to dress conservatively; this usually means a suit and tie for men and a dress or skirted suit for women (Axtell, 1993). Business attire in Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom is similar to that worn in the United States with some minor differences. Dress in Canada, Europe, Japan, and South America is perhaps more formal than in the United States; coats and ties are expected in business settings. Dressing professionally and conservatively is expected in South Korea and Taiwan as appropriate attire indicates respect. In Middle Eastern countries and in Southern Asia, styles of dress vary with the country. Although attire in India varies by region and by religion, men often wear Western-style suits; they may also wear traditional clothing or the safari suit. In Saudi Arabia, men wear traditional attire, which includes an ankle-length white flowing robe and checkered head cloth. Visitors should avoid dressing in native clothing; doing so is perceived as offensive (Devine & Braganti, 1991, 1998; Martin & Chaney, 2006). However, dressing modestly in countries where people do cover their entire bodies is considered appropriate.

The trend toward wearing casual dress, which became popular in U.S. offices in the 1990s, is supposedly over. However, many U.S. employees continue to wear casual attire in the workplace (Fenton, 2002). In some countries, such as the Netherlands, wearing casual attire is linked to rank; a person of higher rank in a company is more likely to dress casually than a person of lower rank. Because dressing casually is inappropriate in the workplace in some countries, wearing casual attire is not recommended when conducting business with people of other cultures.

Attributes of dress considered important when interacting with people of other cultures are color and fabric. Neutral, basic colors usually work best for business attire. Darker colors suggest authority and power and are recommended for men’s suits. Gray signifies success and is popular for clothing for both men and women; black is effective for women. Since certain colors have negative connotations in other countries, visitors should avoid wearing these colors. White, for example, should not be worn in China or in Thailand as white symbolizes mourning in those countries. In fact, in about 75 percent of countries, white is considered funereal. In some countries, such as Ghana, Korea, and many African countries, red is associated with sadness and should not be worn. Brazilians do not wear green and yellow, the colors of the Brazilian flag; visitors should do likewise (Chaney & Martin, 2007; Jandt, 2007). Fabric is also important in clothing selection. Natural fibers, such as cotton, linen, silk, and wool, are associated with higher status and are the best choice when selecting clothing to wear when conducting business with people of other cultures (Bixler & Nix-Rice, 2005).

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication can be helpful or detrimental to building a relationship with international colleagues. Because nonverbal messages are interpreted immediately, whether they are viewed as positive or negative is important. Even though nonverbal signals are not totally reliable, gestures, eye contact, space and touch, and silence provide useful information when decoding messages.

Gestures that have positive connotations in one culture have negative meanings in another. For example, the V for victory gesture is positive in the United States and in many cultures; in England, however, when the palm is facing in the gesture has a crude connotation. The thumbs-up signal is another positive gesture in North America but is rude in Australia and West Africa. Likewise, the OK sign, though positive in the United States, is viewed as obscene in Brazil. In Belgium and France, the meaning is “worthless” or “zero,” while in Japan, the gesture means money. The beckoning gesture (finger upturned, palm facing the body; the hand is waved back and forth) should be used with discretion; it is offensive to Filipinos, Mexicans, and Vietnamese. The gesture is used to summon people considered inferior, such as prostitutes. Because cultures vary widely in their use of gestures, learning a culture’s common gestures is recommended before visiting the country. At the very minimum, it is important to know that people of China, England, Japan, Germany, and Switzerland use few gestures, while people of France, Greece, Italy, Spain, as well as people in Middle Eastern countries and most countries of Central America, are expressive in their gesturing (Axtell, 1998; Martin & Chaney, 2006). Watch what gestures the people in the country use; avoid the use of gestures unless the meaning is known.

Eye contact is important in the U.S. and Canadian macrocultures; eye contact implies attentiveness, respect, truthfulness, and self-confidence. However, a steady, unbroken gaze makes most U.S. people uncomfortable. People of France, Germany, the Middle East, and some Latin American countries favor prolonged eye contact. On the other hand, people in many Asian countries, specifically China and Japan, are uncomfortable with direct eye contact and tend to direct their gaze just below the other person’s chin. Likewise, the Taiwanese prefer minimum eye contact and often look away (Axtell, 1998; Martin & Chaney, 2006).

Space and touch are two important types of nonverbal communication that are closely related. For example, U.S. people need their space; they also prefer to avoid touching, with the exception of shaking hands. Likewise, Canadians and the Dutch value their personal space and do not touch during greetings and conversations. People of Japan and Southeast Asia stand even farther apart than U.S. people and are uncomfortable with touching. On the other hand, people of Latin America, the Middle East, and some Asian countries, e.g., South Korea and Taiwan, stand close while talking; they often touch each other during greetings and conversations. People from cultures that need a lot of space should not step back when interacting with people from cultures who prefer to stand close to avoid giving offense (Axtell, 1998; Martin & Chaney, 2006).

Silence is interpreted differently in the United States and in other cultures. Members of the U.S. macroculture are uncomfortable with silence and often use small talk to avoid it. In Finland and in Asian countries, silence is an important part of communication. Silence in these countries is used to show respect to what another person is saying and to give thought to what is being said. Middle Easterners, on the other hand, do not need periods of silence. People of the Netherlands do not use silence; they welcome opinions of everyone in the group. Stated succinctly, low-context cultures, such as the United States and Canada, are uncomfortable with silence. High-context cultures, such as Germany and Japan, are comfortable with silence. During conversations with people from high-context cultures, silence should not be interrupted (Lewis, 2006; Martin & Chaney, 2006; Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2007).

Suggested Activities for Integrating Intercultural Communication Skills Into Business Courses

To assure that students are prepared for intercultural interactions on the job or during international travels, teachers can provide instruction in intercultural communication to enhance students' skills so that they will feel more confident during intercultural encounters. The following activities, which have been used successfully by the authors in their International Business Communication courses, may prove useful for integrating these skills into various business courses:

- Assign students journal articles related to selected intercultural communication skills to summarize and stimulate class discussion. Asking students to search online for specific topics is another option. Students tend to be fascinated with how other people in the world live.
- Invite guest speakers to address the class on such topics as international customs in dining, tipping, or dress; professors or students from other countries are often happy to share their expertise with students. Guest speakers allow for the students to experience through a third party what it is like to live in another culture and to discuss with the person what was exciting and not so exciting about living in another culture.
- Encourage students to share an example of a *faux pas* they have observed or committed related to intercultural communication; students may also enjoy researching breaches of intercultural communication etiquette that have resulted in unfavorable consequences for U.S. firms. This activity has been used by the authors for a number of years. The students are often asked to act out a skit showing the *faux pas* with a classmate and then explain to their classmates what is going on in these short skits. Generally, the skits only last for two to three minutes with explanation and discussion following. This activity is also a good way to get students in front of the class. The *faux pas* can also be assigned as indicated in the following activity.
- Assign students a *faux pas* that may have caused offense, resulted in embarrassment, or conveyed the impression that the person lacks social skills. Instruct students to research the topic to determine what was inappropriate about the behavior and what the person should have done (Martin & Chaney, 2009). Below are some documented *faux pas* that might be used; what students should find from researching the *faux pas* is indicated in *italics*.
 - A U.S. businessperson used the business card of a Japanese colleague to dislodge food from between his teeth (Axtell, 1998). *Business cards are treated with great respect by the Japanese; do not write on them, place them in the back pocket, or use them for a toothpick* (Martin & Chaney, 2009).
 - During his first business trip to England, a U.S. business executive asked a man from Scotland about his wife and children. He was told it was none of his business (Stoller, 2007). *Do not ask Scottish men personal questions* (Martin & Chaney, 2009).
 - A U.S. business traveler, dining at a restaurant during his first meeting in France, initially drank red wine but then changed to white wine. The shocked expressions on the faces of his French associates spoke volumes (Stoller, 2007). *Drinking a white wine after a red is*

considered improper; the bouquet of the white cannot be enjoyed properly after having drunk a red wine.

- A U.S. office worker at a Japanese-owned company in the United States used a beckoning gesture (crooking the index finger) to indicate to her Japanese boss with limited English skills that she wished him to come to her desk to look at something. *The crooked index finger is an obscene gesture in Japan (Dresser, 2005).*
- Divide the class into teams; assign each team a case study to be discussed in class. Here are two examples of cases that would be appropriate (Chaney & Martin, 2007):
 - Your company is hosting a party in the United States for its distributors from Mexico, Japan, and France. What foods would be appropriate and which foods should not be served to avoid offending anyone?
 - After Frank Lewis, the manager of a large U.S. bookstore, hired Ching Wu, a newcomer from China, as a clerk, he invited her to join him for coffee to try to get to know her better. Throughout their conversation, Frank noticed that Ching Wu always looked down at the floor and never gave him eye contact. He interpreted this as inattention and lack of respect. Discuss the nonverbal communication differences in this situation.
- Assign each team one of the top 10 U.S. trading partners. Permit the teams to select two of the five topics addressed in this paper for further research and for making an oral report to the class.
- Give the following quiz to determine students' knowledge of the top 10 U.S. trading partners. (Countries listed to the right may be used more than once or not at all.)

<input type="checkbox"/> 1. The business card is presented with both hands.	A. Canada
<input type="checkbox"/> 2. Politics is an appropriate topic for verbal dueling.	B. China
<input type="checkbox"/> 3. People are not skilled at small talk or chitchat.	C. France
<input type="checkbox"/> 4. Chopsticks are more common for eating than utensils.	D. Germany
<input type="checkbox"/> 5. Tipping is not expected.	E. Japan
<input type="checkbox"/> 6. Wearing white clothing symbolizes mourning.	F. Mexico
<input type="checkbox"/> 7. The OK sign means worthless or zero.	G. Netherlands
<input type="checkbox"/> 8. The beckoning gesture is considered offensive.	H. South Korea
<input type="checkbox"/> 9. Prolonged eye contact is preferred.	I. Taiwan
<input type="checkbox"/> 10. Standing close during conversations is customary.	J. United Kingdom

Answers: **1:** B, E, I; **2:** C, D, J; **3:** D, E; **4:** B, E, H, I; **5:** B, E; **6:** B, E, H, I; **7:** C; **8:** E, F; **9:** C, D; **10:** F, H, I

In summary, knowing that business decisions are often made in nonbusiness settings is important for students and employees. Students should prepare themselves for the cultural differences they will encounter in today's business world. Employees with good communication skills, especially in international encounters, can influence their personal success as well as the success of the firms they represent.

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