

Tips to Help Build Cross-Culture Business Skills

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“Manners are a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others. If you have that awareness, you have good manners, no matter what fork you use.” – Emily Post (1872-1960)

Long before international business etiquette writer, Terri Morrison, penned *Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands* (a must-read for any real estate practitioner with global clients), Emily Post, a.k.a. Miss Manners, preached the importance of proper etiquette. Post defined etiquette as a code of behavior based on kindness, respect and consideration for the purpose of helping people get along and avoid conflict. If you are a real estate practitioner who works with international buyers or sellers, or if you are trying to expand your business globally, take heed of Miss Manner’s advice! This definition is a great way to think about cross-cultural business and social skills.

Beyond the everyday good manners you already use in the course of business, when you are working with foreign clients, how can you be sure that your behavior is appropriate? Listed below are some basic cross-cultural do’s and don’ts. These guidelines can help you reduce the risk of making a cultural faux pas.

Saving face: In the business world, brutal honesty (for better or for worse) is often times appreciated. However, this is not a universal opinion, rather, a western attitude that could unknowingly cause great offense. Allowing others to save face is a valuable cross-cultural skill. As a rule of thumb, never do anything to embarrass another person, either in that person’s eyes, or in the eyes of others. This principle may sound obvious, but in practice, blunders are easy to make, especially if you are working with a buyer who has never purchased property in Australia before. For example, if you are talking with a client about insurance, you may receive blank stares. Indemnity insurance is likely to be a foreign concept to most foreign buyers. Be careful with your explanation. Avoid statements like, “You look confused. Let me clarify”. While your intention is good, this statement could be deemed insulting.

Additionally, you shouldn't sacrifice your own face, even if your intention is harmless. For example, if you are showing a home to a foreign client and need to convert feet into meters, don't joke that you are useless at math. This simple statement could inadvertently tarnish your reputation.

Build the relationship: When you are first introduced to someone, do not try to create an instant friendship. Wait to be invited before you use first names. In many cultures, first meetings are for getting acquainted; don't expect deals to be signed right away. The pace of "getting down to business" varies from culture to culture.

Talk less, listen more: Respect the role of silence and know when to talk and when to keep quiet. Communicate informatively rather than persuasively. Practice listening with both your ears and your eyes; sometimes nonverbal behavior can be telling. A shrug of the shoulders, a smile, silence— these nonverbal actions may indicate that the other person does not understand. Remember, "yes" does not always mean "I agree."

Business card etiquette: In some cultures there is substantial etiquette associated with presenting and receiving business cards. As a general rule of practice, always treat business cards respectfully. When someone hands you their card, take the time to look it over. Show respect by commenting positively. Avoid putting the card in your pocket (especially your back pocket) or your wallet.

These are just a few tips that will help you when working with home buyers and sellers from a variety of cultures. Keep in mind that interactions with foreign clients proceed best and lead to successful transactions when you are sensitive to their expectations of business and social behavior. The more you know about your client's culture, the more effective your interactions will be.

Interested in learning more? The Certified International Property Specialist (CIPS) designation offers training designed to help real estate agents know how to interact with people from around the world. The elective courses are divided up by regional focus- Europe, the Americas (Caribbean, North, Central, and South America) and Asia/Asia Pacific. Each course covers business practices and social behaviors specific to individual countries and cultures within the region. For more information visit: <http://reia.asn.au/agents/certified-international-property-specialist-cips-online-course/>