

The World's A Stage

How Well Do Your Sales Skills Perform?

By Michele Peterson

The ability to understand and interpret local cultures is critical to business and personal success in a foreign destination. Being cross-culturally effective often means being able to adapt North American skills to fit foreign conditions and constraints. Learning how to do it correctly can pay dividends. It earns you the respect of others and builds strong relationships – both of which can add up to a competitive sales advantage. How well do your cross-cultural sales skills perform? Take the quiz and find out.



AFTER HOURS

Scenario: While on assignment in Russia, a long-time client invites you to dinner with an important prospect. You have one hour, how do you prepare?

- 1. Call the concierge for advice on selecting a suitable gift and then make sure it is carefully wrapped
- 2. Research your prospect's business to better focus your questions
- 3. Prepare and rehearse a toast to your host

According to the Centre for Intercultural Learning in Ottawa, you might want to invest some time preparing a speech. In Russia, affection – especially on occasions where there is alcohol – is often expected once you are accepted. It often takes the form of complimentary toasts and speeches about a chosen person.

GIFT-GIVING

Scenario: You are planning a trip to Asia and will be visiting clients in Malaysia, Japan and China. You've heard that it is customary to give a gift to your host. How many gifts do you purchase?

- 1. None, as your company policy dictates against it
- 2. Three, each client receives a leather briefcase with your company logo
- 3. Neither of the above

You should take two gifts. Although gift-giving is a business tradition in Japan and China, the Malaysian government is concerned with corruption so your gift might be perceived as a bribe. Instead, Sandra Ngoh-Fonseka of the Malaysia Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism recommends sending a gift basket on a festive occasion. Avoid gifts of liquor, pork or pigskin leather as they are forbidden in the Muslim culture.



MONEY MATTERS

Scenario: You have scheduled several visits with clients in Italy. Prior to departure your accounting department advises that one client is 90 days overdue. Company policy dictates they will soon be cut off from future orders. In order to preserve the relationship, you should:

- 1. E-mail your contact immediately to advise them you want to discuss it during your visit
- 2. Take them out for dinner and bring the issue up as soon as possible
- 3. Speak directly to their accounting manager

None of the above are ideal. While mixing business and pleasure is crucial to sales success in Italy, it is bad manners to talk business at the beginning of a meeting. Circumventing your client could cause them to lose face. One alternative might be to telephone, affirm the value of the relationship and suggest there may be an accounting glitch to address.

TABLE MANNERS

Scenario: You've been invited to a client's home in Korea for dinner. Which of the following might be considered rude?

- 1. Wandering around and admiring rooms such as the kitchen
- 2. Picking your teeth at the table
- 3. Eating your rice with a spoon

In Korea, rice can be eaten with a spoon, so the correct answer is number one. When you are a guest in someone's home, entertaining is confined to a few select rooms.

MEETING BASICS

Scenario: You are hosting a conference in Mexico City. Participants include coworkers, business colleagues from other companies, Mexican officials, university heads, and members of the military. How should you approach seating at the formal meeting session?

- 1. Seat yourself at the head of the table with your business colleague to your right so you can confer on important issues
- 2. Arrive early to ensure proper supplies are available and to assist participants select their own seats
- 3. Consult an expert for assistance

In Mexico, the privileges of rank and hierarchy are adhered to formally. Proper protocol means guests should be seated according to rank and position. Your company's most senior person should head the table with the person of highest rank occupying the place of honour, flanking the host to the right. The Office of Protocol, Department of Foreign Affairs, is a good source on such issues.