

# Doing business abroad? Simple faux pas can sink you

By **Gary Stoller**, USA TODAY  
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Globalization has made cross-border business deals more common than ever. But, every day, deals are jeopardized or lost when foreign associates are offended by Americans unaware of other countries' customs, culture or manners, etiquette experts say.

They commit a faux pas (a slip or blunder in etiquette, manners or conduct) while traveling, meeting a foreigner here or communicating on the phone or Internet.

"Americans are way too informal in their dealings with their counterparts abroad, and they end up perceived as uncouth and even obnoxious," says P.M. Forni, a professor of Italian literature and civility at Johns Hopkins University. "Innocence, stupidity or arrogance make them behave in Cyprus the way they would in Cleveland."

Politicians and celebrities are not immune, generating highlight reels of faux pas for late-night talk shows. In May, actor Mickey Rooney caused a stir in Great Britain when he violated protocol by kissing Queen Elizabeth's hand at the British Embassy in Washington, D.C. In April, Richard Gere repeatedly kissed actress Shilpa Shetty on the cheek at an AIDS awareness rally in April in New Delhi, India, a country where public displays of affection are generally taboo. An Indian court issued a warrant for his arrest and irate protestors burned effigies of the actor. The warrant was later suspended.

President Bush used an expletive while talking to British Prime Minister Tony Blair at a meeting in Germany last year. He also gave German Chancellor Angela Merkel a shoulder rub while she spoke to Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi. Many Europeans were offended because the summit was a formal occasion and they viewed the actions as demeaning.

Many American business travelers also commit faux pas, making, in many cases, already-challenging deals all the more elusive.

Robert Burns, the American owner of CC Bloom's Hotel in Phuket, Thailand, says he's inadvertently insulted or embarrassed Thais several times. During his first business meetings in Thailand a few years ago, he started the gatherings by talking about business.

"That's a no-no," he says. "I quickly figured out that I was creating problems by talking business before eating lunch and by initiating the talks."

Terry Buchen, of Williamsburg, Va., says he made the mistake of asking personal questions of a Scottish man on his first business trip to England in 1994. Buchen asked the man about his wife and children during a casual conversation. "I was flatly told it was none of my

business," recalls the golf-course consultant. "I then asked him about the weather, and I could not get the guy to stop talking about it."

"Americans often do not realize how dismaying their directness can be for people from different cultures," says David Solomons, chief executive of London-based CultureSmart Consulting. The company has a guidebook series for travelers, and it consults for corporations.

San Francisco-based etiquette consultant Syndi Seid says a client, a company in Seattle, lost a big business deal in the 1990s because it did not understand a Japanese company's business culture. During negotiations, the U.S. company, which Seid didn't identify, invited the Japanese company to Seattle, but for months, officials of the foreign company had trouble obtaining visas. The impatient U.S. company sent high-level executives to Japan to close the deal.

It backfired because the Japanese executives were eager to visit the USA and were turned off by the Americans' lack of patience in building a rapport between the companies.

Seid says another unidentified client, a Silicon Valley company, nearly lost a business deal five years ago when a top executive of a French company arrived in California on an evening flight. The U.S. company sent a limo to pick up the client at 7:30 p.m., but no staff member went along. The company thought the Frenchman might want to relax at a hotel after a long flight and planned to pick him up the next morning. But the Frenchman was offended because no top official met him at the airport.

"The French eat dinner later than 7:30, and he thought he'd be taken out to dinner," recalls Seid. "It nearly killed the deal."

In many cultures, one's family defines an individual, says Terri Morrison, co-author of a business etiquette book series, *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands*. "Therefore, making an error in a person's name is quite a personal insult."

Take the Chinese practice of placing the surname first. "Calling (Chinese President Hu Jintao) 'President Tao' is appalling, like calling him President George, or Bubba," she says.

Morrison says she has seen American executives look at business cards from Latin American clients and not realize that a Hispanic father's surname is listed first, followed by the mother's. For example, Señor Juan Antonio Martinez Garcia should be addressed as Señor Martinez, she says.

Ranjini Manian, who runs a company in Chennai, India, that helps expatriates adjust to Indian culture, recalls a client who worked for Ford Motor in India in the mid-1990s. The client was left-handed and used his left hand to cut a ribbon at a bank opening.

"The left hand is considered inauspicious in India, and there was consternation all around," says Manian, the author of *Doing Business in India for Dummies*. "The ribbon was retied and cut again with the right hand."

Manian remembers another occasion when an American in the construction business offended an Indian engineer working for him in India. The American beckoned the engineer by snapping his fingers and waving a curled forefinger. To an Indian, such a gesture is condescending and insulting. The engineer, who was also upset by the American's use of four-letter words earlier in the week, resigned.

"The curled finger proved to be the last straw, and the Indian told me he felt treated like a dog," says Manian. "The American was aghast when I told him and tempered down for the rest of the project, but he had already lost one of his best Indian engineers, who he had trained for three months on the project."

### **Dining no-no's**

Table manners also get many U.S. business travelers in trouble, etiquette experts say. In the USA and the U.K., it's customary to put hands on the lap when not using them. But it "demonstrates very poor manners" in France and other countries where the hands and wrists should remain on top of the table, says Tamiko Zablith, an etiquette and protocol consultant in France and England. "You also should not leave the table before the meal is over, even if you need to go to the restroom," she says.

In some regions of Asia, it's "a sign of pleasure to belch after a meal," and you "should slurp your noodles as loudly as possible," Zablith says. Business travelers should research chopstick etiquette because it varies among Asian countries. In China, for example, diners pick up the rice bowl and use chopsticks. Koreans do not pick up their rice bowl and usually use a spoon.

When dining in the Middle East, North Africa or other Muslim lands, always use the right hand, because the left "is deemed unclean and disrespectful," Zablith says.

Another caution: "Never turn up your nose at the local delicacy," says Morrison. "It may be the most prestigious item on the menu, which they bought at great expense just for you."

Frequent business traveler Jerry Galiger, of Winston-Salem, N.C., committed a faux pas without saying a word. During his first meeting in France with his United Kingdom-based company, he drank red wine, then switched to white.

"From the expressions of the group, you would have thought I exposed myself," says Galiger, whose company makes storage systems. "I later found out you never go to a white after a red, because you can't enjoy the bouquet of the white after you've drunk a red."

Cultural clashes are not limited to individuals or groups of people discussing or negotiating a business deal. An entire company can suffer from cultural differences. The \$36 billion acquisition of the USA's Chrysler by Germany's Daimler-Benz in 1998 was marked by "the most significant cultural clash in the business world in recent memory," Solomons says. The aim of the merger was to create an international automotive behemoth, but it didn't happen. In May, DaimlerChrysler sold the Chrysler group, which reported a \$2 billion first-quarter loss this year.

Culture clash alone doesn't fully explain the failure of DaimlerChrysler, but it was a destructive element apparent from the start. After the merger, German and American executives "spent a lot of time wrangling about the size of the new company's business card," says Jeswald Salacuse, a professor at Tufts University's law and diplomacy school. "Would it follow the small American-size card or the larger size common in Europe?"

The dispute symbolized deeper divisions that prevented the company from becoming a cohesive unit. "Much of the disaster, as they acknowledged, was caused by a basic lack of understanding of each others' national and, by implication, corporate-cultural differences," says Solomons.

Many corporations prevent their employees from sticking their feet in their mouths by educating them about foreign customs, manners and culture. Houston businessman Mickey David says he always studies a country's cultures and customs before going. His health care company offers online courses and other information to employees before they visit other countries. Susan Jacobsen, who works for a Washington law firm and has planned international business meetings in the past 10 years, suggests [www.executiveplanet.com](http://www.executiveplanet.com). She says the website had such tips as, "The French will revert to English if they see you floundering."

Such resources can be valuable for non-travelers, because the business world is confronting an "etiquette learning curve" for new technologies, says Sue Fox, author of *Business Etiquette for Dummies*. The electronic devices that permit instant communication also open the door to offending people in other countries. "Behave just as if you are having a face-to-face conversation with them," Fox warns.

Learning the customs and culture of a foreign country "signals respect for the other side, and respect is important in developing a business relationship," says Tufts' Salacuse. "The fact that you haven't learned the history and the customs raises questions about the sincerity of how committed you are to doing business in the country."