

Bridging the Culture Gap

By Laraine Kaminsky

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Expert Forum



An American golf ball manufacturer launched its products in Japan packed in boxes of four, then had to change the package size. Why? In Japanese the word "four" sounds like the word for "death." Things don't sell well packed in four.

When conducting business internationally, you are faced with different sets of cultural rules. While cultural awareness is not always considered a key success factor when exporting, failure to recognize cultural differences could lead to serious misunderstandings, thus jeopardizing business relationships and possibly contracts.

Here are some tips to help bridge the culture gap:

Do your homework. Learn about the host country – its history, politics, people, and culture. Having this sort of background information will help you to adapt accordingly. Try to visit countries before you do business with them. The more exposure you have to their culture, the greater your understanding will be.

Set up for success. Exporters come across inpatriation, expatriation, and repatriation issues. Help employees and their families to ease the transition through the stages of culture shock by providing cultural adaptation training.

Check the calendar. Holidays and events can play havoc with business trips and deadlines. Whether it is Ramadan or the World Cup, you need to know when and why parts of the world are doing business or not.

Learn the appropriate greetings. Different cultures meet and greet in various ways. From the one-handed handshake to the handshake with a hug, one, two, or three kisses on the cheek, or the rituals involved in bowing and exchanging business cards - use whichever is appropriate.

Suspend judgement. Perception does not always equal reality. An outsider's view of some cultural norms, such as the exchange of gifts, may be based on misconceptions or incorrect assumptions. Don't impose your values on another culture.

Acquire knowledge of the local language. Knowing the local language can avoid embarrassing situations. For example, the Chevrolet Nova car had trouble selling in Puerto Rico because it sounded like no va, meaning "it doesn't go."

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Be aware of body language too. Gestures that are acceptable at home may be considered rude and inappropriate elsewhere. For example, in India do not cross your legs while seated; to point your foot at someone is offensive. In Brazil, the "okay" sign used by North Americans (thumb and index finger forming a circle and the other fingers raised) is considered vulgar.

If you take steps to familiarize yourself with the culture in your target markets, you will be better equipped to do business in those markets. Knowledge, understanding, a sense of burnout, and appreciation of the differences among cultures can make bridging the gap much easier.