

# MISUNDERSTANDING BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

*Why Companies Struggle to Connect Across the Atlantic*

**By Ralf G. Bahr**

One of the most underestimated factors in international business is not strategy, product, or capital. It is relationships.

Over decades of working between Germany and the United States, I have seen companies succeed or fail based on how well they understand and manage business relationships in a different culture.

Relationships are not built the same way everywhere.

## **Two Different Foundations**

In Germany, business relationships are traditionally built over time and are based on::

- Structure
- Reliability
- Consistency

Trust develops gradually. It is earned through performance, predictability, and professionalism. Once established, these relationships tend to be stable and long-lasting.

In the United States, the dynamic is different. Relationships are built more quickly, but they are also more fluid. They are based on:

- Accessibility
- Responsiveness
- Ongoing engagement

Initial trust is often granted quickly, but it must be reinforced continuously.

## **Speed vs. Continuity**

Many European companies assume that once a relationship is established, it will continue naturally. In the U.S., that assumption can be costly. Business relationships require:

- Regular communication
- Visible presence
- Continuous follow-up

If communication slows down, attention shifts elsewhere. The market does not wait.

### **The Role of Communication**

Communication styles vary significantly. German communication tends to be:

- Structured
- Detailed
- Less frequent

American communication is:

- More frequent
- More direct
- More immediate

In the U.S., responsiveness is often interpreted as a sign of commitment. A delayed response may not be seen as thoughtful; it may be seen as a lack of interest.

### **Visibility Creates Relevance**

One of the most important lessons in the U.S. market is that visibility matters. Companies must remain visible:

- In conversations
- In meetings
- In follow-ups
- In the market itself

Out of sight often means out of mind. Competitors who stay visible attract attention—and often the business.

### **Relationship Maintenance Is Active, Not Passive**

In Germany, strong relationships can endure with less frequent interaction. In the U.S., relationships require active management. This includes:

- Regular check-ins
- Quick responses
- Proactive communication

Being reliable is not enough. You must also be present.

## **A Common Mistake**

A common mistake is applying the same relationship approach used in Europe to the U.S. market. Companies assume:

- Time will build trust
- Quality will sustain interest
- Silence will be understood

In reality:

- Time without communication weakens the connection
- Quality without visibility goes unnoticed
- Silence breeds uncertainty

## **Adapting Without Losing Identity**

Adapting to a different relationship culture does not mean abandoning your values. Reliability, quality, and professionalism remain essential, but they must be paired with:

- Speed
- Visibility
- Engagement

The most successful companies do not change who they are. They adjust how they connect.

## **Conclusion**

Business relationships are not defined only by trust. They are defined by how that trust is built and maintained.

Germany and the United States approach this differently. Understanding that difference is not a minor detail. It is a competitive advantage. In the end:

**Business is done between people.  
And people respond to those who show up.**

*If you have questions or would like to share your perspective, I would be interested to hear from you.*

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