

Customer Diversity

Jason watches a team of surveyors enter the lobby and prepares to discuss the new subdivision his company is developing with their firm, International Partners, Ltd. He sees one Hispanic woman, one Asian woman, what seems to be an American man, and—by the appearance of the turbans—two men he believes to be from India.

As he greets the surveyors with a handshake and a hearty hello—adding a slap on the back to one of the men—he notices them drawing away.

They begin the meeting and Jason becomes frustrated with the poor English of some of the visitors. The group has trouble communicating, and he is worried whether the project will ever get off the ground.

Unexpectedly, Mr. Wilhelm, the owner of Jason's company, enters the room—he's just back from Taiwan. Jason observes as Mr. Wilhelm shakes some hands, bows to the Asian visitor, and smiles only to the others. His voice is soft and charming, and Jason notices that the volume is lower than usual.

Mr. Wilhelm takes over the meeting, listening intently as each guest speaks. After the meeting ends successfully, Jason thanks his boss and says, "You saved that meeting. I had a hard time talking to those people. They're so different."

Mr. Wilhelm comments, "Jason, maybe you're the one who's different." Then he smiles and says, "I've studied the customs of the people we do

business with. As an international company, we'll be successful only if we fit in with them. Our customers have to develop a comfort level with us."



What's Inside

Here, you will learn to

- ◆ recognize how business is changing
- ◆ blend in when you travel to other countries
- ◆ use demographics effectively

Workshop
9

The Changing World of Business

Business today is global. More companies than ever before have clients in other countries. You may talk with customers in Denver in the morning, with customers in Istanbul after lunch, and with customers in Haiti before you leave for the day. Many companies expand into other countries to take advantage of new markets, achieve tax breaks, use cheap labor, or move closer to the natural or personnel resources they need.



For workers in the United States, these trends have two important implications:

- ◆ Your customers and your coworkers may live in different countries from you, which means their culture and understanding of the English language will be different from yours.
- ◆ You may be sent to another country to set up operations, train local employees, troubleshoot problems, assist expansion or other efforts, or perform other functions.

Serving International Customers

Correct behavior varies from culture to culture. Before you work with customers from another country, learn about their customs and apply what you know to your interactions with them. Etiquette International, a firm that advises companies on U.S. and international protocol, recommends looking at the following factors:

◆ **Communication Style:** Are customers in the country anxious to get right to business, or do they spend time developing trust and a relationship first? Do they speak in a direct manner, like North Americans, or in an indirect manner? Are there common verbal and nonverbal communication cues you should know? In Asian countries, for example, “yes” is used to acknowledge what you’ve said, not necessarily to indicate agreement.

◆ **Greetings:** Learn the appropriate way to greet people from the country. Should titles, such as Monsieur and Madame, be used?

Is a handshake or a bow correct? And does the culture put family names before first names? In China, for example, Lin Yu-tang would be addressed as Mr. Lin, not Mr. Yu-tang.

“ Protocol is the lubricant that allows two or more moving parts to come together without friction.

— **BILL BLACK**

*Former State of California
Chief of Protocol*

- ◆ **Dress:** Does the culture have any clothing taboos? Do women need to cover their arms or legs? Or their heads?
- ◆ **Personal Space:** And how much personal space do people need? In Great Britain, people have a larger intimate zone than ours; that is, they aren't comfortable with people who stand too close; people in Latin America generally have a smaller comfort zone.
- ◆ **Time:** What time zone is the country in? What time can you call without waking a customer in the middle of the night for a routine business matter? What is the culture's concept of time. How punctual are the people? How far in advance should meetings be scheduled?
- ◆ **Gift Giving and Entertaining:** People who spend time working in another country often present their client or coworkers in that country with a gift that shows appreciation for their host's hospitality. Learn what gifts are appropriate and when and to whom they should be given. If you are invited to someone's house for dinner, find out whether you are expected to issue a return invitation.



- ◆ **Off-Limit Subjects:** Just as ethnic jokes are considered off color in our country, conversation about politics, religion, ethnicity, or gender may be considered politically incorrect in other countries. Learn the subjects that are off limits, and avoid them.

“ It can be totally unnerving when a task-oriented, linear American, who considers time a commodity to be managed, is confronted with a relationship-oriented Arab, Asian, or Latin, who considers time as flowing and flexible, beyond human control, and to be accepted, whatever happens.

— **HILKA KLINKENBERG**

*Founder and managing director
of Etiquette International*

ACTIVITY 9.1

NAME _____

What Time Is It?

Using the Internet, a time zone map, the front pages of a telephone book, or some other reference, calculate the answers to the following questions. For each answer, fill in the time and then mark Same Day, Previous Day, or Next Day.

1. You've been working on a project for an important client in Kathmandu, Nepal, and you have questions you need the client to answer. If you want to reach your client at 5 p.m. his time, what time would you need to call from Denver, Colorado?

Same Day

Previous Day

Next Day

2. You are a distributor for a company that sells quality personal care products. You've been in contact with several store owners in London by email. One of them has expressed interest in stocking your product line. If you want to reach her at 2:00 p.m. her time and you work in Miami, what time would you need to call?

Same Day

Previous Day

Next Day

3. You've been sent to Singapore to troubleshoot problems a company is having manufacturing computer motherboards to your company's specifications. You want to call your family in Los Angeles. What time should you call to catch your spouse at home at 6:00 p.m. LA time?

Same Day

Previous Day

Next Day

4. Your publishing house has its books printed in Manila, the Philippines. You need to verify the schedule for one of the books. What time should you place a call from Boston to reach the printing supervisor at 3:00 p.m. in Manila?

Same Day

Previous Day

Next Day

5. Just after your boss arrives in Nassau for her vacation, an important client she's been trying to reach for months calls her. The client will be available for just two days and then will be unavailable for several months. What time should you place a call from Dallas, Texas, to reach your boss at 8:00 a.m. in Nassau?

Same Day

Previous Day

Next Day

1. 6 a.m.-Same Day, / 2. 9 a.m.-Same Day, / 3. 9 a.m.-Next day, / 4. 3 a.m.-Same Day, / 5. 7 a.m.-Same Day

When in Rome . . .

The expression, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” applies to anyone who conducts business—or even vacations—in another country. When relating to customers or coworkers in their country, you’ll be most successful if you do as they do. Make every effort to blend in. If you don’t, you risk offending the people you want to build relationships with.

That means you have to do your predeparture homework. Learn which language is used in business and how comfortable the people are with English. Learn such practical things as which hand you should use to hold your fork, how to catch a waiter’s attention, and how to locate the American



Embassy. Discover the customary way to shake hands. Investigate the topics that interest the people of that country. If sports are a national obsession, which teams are popular and who are the major players?

Many library books and Websites offer helpful tips for travelers on the customs of different nationalities. Although some Websites provide the information for a fee, several post it for free. If you visit a Website, be sure to review

the sections entitled “Customs” and “Culture”.

Gestures, topics of conversation, and even dress that Americans consider harmless can be offensive to people in different countries.

ACTIVITY 9.2

NAME _____

How Much Do You Know?

Match the behavior in Column A with a country in Column B where the behavior would be considered inappropriate.

In this country it would be inappropriate to:

- | | |
|--|--------------------|
| a. Give the gift of a leather-bound day planner | _____ Morocco |
| b. Single an employee out with a compliment | _____ Germany |
| c. Be even a few minutes late for an appointment | _____ Saudi Arabia |
| d. Wear shorts, even for casual dress | _____ India |
| e. Hold a glass with your left hand | _____ Japan |

Morocco, e / Germany, c / Saudi Arabia, d / India, a / Japan, b

Demographic Trends

Think about the effects the following trends will have on your customers, your coworkers and your job.

- ◆ In 1970, non-Hispanic whites made up 84 percent of the U.S. population. By 1988, their share had dropped to 73 percent. By 2050, it is estimated that non-Hispanic whites will account for just over 50 percent of the population. In many inner cities, people of color far outnumber non-Hispanic whites.
- ◆ Men and women communicate differently in the workplace. Whether you're male or female, you need to develop skills to communicate with supervisors, coworkers, and customers of the opposite sex.
- ◆ With the globalization of business, employees often work side-by-side with people of different customs. Are you prepared to work and live in this international environment?
- ◆ America's population is aging. You'll need to learn more about older customers before doing business with them. Their habits are different from those of your younger customers.

ACTIVITY 9.3

NAME _____

Serve Me My Way

Learning how to serve customers who are different from you is an important success strategy. What special methods would you use with each of the following people?

1. A young Hispanic mother who speaks English poorly and needs to locate grocery items in your store.

2. A South African male who speaks to you through an interpreter.

3. An Asian manager who wishes to speak to you about a bridge-building project that his company and yours have developed.



GETTING CONNECTED

For more helpful tips on cultural differences between nationalities,
locate the following Website:

<https://myqss.link/Cultural-Customs>

WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- Your customers and coworkers may live in a different country from you.
- When relating with customers or coworkers in their country, act as they do.
- Correct behavior varies from culture to culture.
- Learn about other cultures, so you can avoid unintentionally offending people by your actions.
- U.S. workers often work side by side with people of different cultures.