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In Mexico, Old World formality is norm for business, social events

On first meeting you, a Mexican will evaluate your etiquette skills. If they are impressed, they will do business with you. If they are unimpressed, they will have as little to do with you as possible.

In Mexico, good manners are synonymous with good business. They are an indication of your educational level and cultural sophistication.

From early childhood, Mexicans are taught the basics of etiquette both at home and in school. Old World formality is the norm in business and social occasions.

Unfortunately, in the United States, the hippie generation of the '60s focused on individual freedoms. This new freedom had its positive aspects but excluded the concept of propriety or etiquette, which was viewed as pro-establishment.

Therefore, the true meaning of etiquette, which is self-sacrifice for the benefit of society as a whole, was a forgotten concept.

In fact, in a recent survey conducted among executives of Fortune 500 companies, "80 percent of the presidents, vice presidents and chairmen of the board had impeccable manners. At the middle-management level, only 40 percent had this self-sacrifice; and among young, recently hired employees, only 12 percent were skilled in the social arena."

Today, etiquette is making an enormous comeback because there are fewer and fewer global boundaries. The executive of the year 2000 will have to be as comfortable in the dining room as in the board room, whether it be in Mexico, the Middle East, Japan or Europe.

Some basic etiquette guidelines for dealing with Mexican businesspeople:

Always greet with a handshake. An embrace is usually reserved for friends and family. If you have an ongoing relationship with a Mexican and visit his office frequently, shake hands with the other people in the office. Inquire about their well-being and that of their families.

Mexicans are a warm, hospitable people and physical touching is part of their culture.

Good manners will translate into good business

Do not expect the firm handshake that is customary in the United States. The Mexican handshake may be soft and lingering.

Do not pull away abruptly as this may indicate lack of sincerity and a desire for emotional distance.

Mexicans will stand much closer to you in conversation. Be aware of this and resist the urge to back away.

Time is a relative concept. The attitude in the United States is "time is money." The Mexican may be late because he was helping a friend or relative with a problem, or he may be stranded in Mexico City's notorious traffic.

Americans tend to speed up business dealings and are perplexed by the *mañana* attitude of their Mexican counterparts. The difference lies in the fact that Mexicans will take time to build relationships and then do business, whereas Americans use time to do business first and perhaps build on the relationship later.

It will take at least five or six visits before a relationship has been formed. After this, business dealings will proceed in Mexico.

Always use titles unless some indication is given otherwise.

In restaurants and public places "please" and "thank you" should never be forgotten.

Americans believe in the direct approach and "business is business." In Mexico, business is secondary to a person's dignity. Be sensitive to the feelings of your Mexican counterparts. Never blame or reprimand them in public. If you must, always do so in private. Be extremely careful to never insult a Mexican or his family.

Mexicans are extremely spiritual and have strong beliefs in a higher purpose. They tend to let fate take its course and have a somewhat fatalistic outlook. Americans tend to believe in a bright future.

The family is extremely important and most businesses are family owned. Connections also play a vital role in the workings of Mexican business.

Never ask for an immediate decision from a Mexican. The business, for the most part, will be family owned and every decision may need family approval before implementation.

When meeting in the office of a Mexican, be prepared for interruptions from family and friends. This would be extremely rude in the United States, but in Mexico — the family is the business.

Be prepared to bargain. Otherwise, you will be perceived as naive. If you refuse to

bargain you may appear rude and ignorant.

The main meal of the day is usually "midday." Midday is not necessarily noon. The meal can begin at 1:30 p.m. or later and last until 3:30. Take plenty of time. Mexicans like to wine and dine before they wheel and deal.

Lunch is usually not a time to discuss business. It is a time to become better acquainted and build on that all-important relationship.

Entertain elegantly. Invite them to a restaurant where you know the atmosphere, the food and the service are excellent. Choose a restaurant where the maitre d' knows you and your preferences. When the maitre d' goes to extra lengths to welcome you and provide you with special services, it creates a very positive impression.

Brief the maitre d' on the timing of the luncheon; whether you would like it to be fast-paced or slow and relaxed.

Ensure that your guest is seated in the best seat. Never seat him facing a mirror (it's too distracting) or in front of an open door in winter or air-conditioning unit in summer. Also, avoid seating him facing the kitchen or rest rooms.

Pay the check either beforehand with your credit card (when you are well-known in an establishment) or excuse yourself before coffee is served and pay it at that time.

In the United States, it is acceptable to keep your left hand in your lap while using your right hand to hold your fork. In Mexico, it is customary to keep your wrists on the table while eating.

Conversational topics: Avoid political and historical topics and especially illegal immigration. Mexicans like to discuss archeology, monuments, museums, art, etc. Be well informed about your local landmarks, museums and cultural events.

Inquire about their rich culture and listen attentively. The best conversationalists are also the best listeners.

Learn a little Spanish. Even if it is not perfect, it will be appreciated.

The most important point to remember if you plan to do business internationally is, always do your homework before you go.

Adopt an attitude of patience and flexibility. Study their history, which will help you understand their culture and social behavior or etiquette.

Diplomacy is the new sales technique and you are a diplomat representing your company and your country.