

The Germans take their manners very seriously

The strongest economy in Europe is that of unified Germany, and American firms that produce high-quality products and services are finding that Germany is an excellent market.

According to a recent article by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School:

"In the global economy, a well-developed ability to create and sustain fruitful collaborations gives companies a significant competitive leg up. Yet, too often, top executives devote more time to screening potential partners in financial terms than to managing the partnership in human terms."

Managing the partnership in human terms requires a knowledge of the culture and business protocol of your targeted country. Some of the questions frequently asked:

How do I establish initial business contacts in Germany?

Most business contacts are best done through trade fairs in Frankfurt, Hanover, Cologne and Dusseldorf. If you plan to contact a German firm directly, a letter is the desired form of introduction as opposed to a phone call. Rank and hierarchy are important in the German culture, therefore, address the letter to the highest ranking person in the company.

What is the appropriate etiquette when meeting a German businessman at his office?

Punctuality is highly valued on both business and social occasions. In this regard, Germans are very similar to Americans. Present your business card to the secretary on entering the company's offices. Ensure that you have your name, title and any university degrees printed on your card. It is not necessary to have the information translated into German on the back as most Germans speak English quite well. Bring plenty of business cards as you will be exchanging them frequently.

Germans are extremely formal and all introductions will be "Herr" (Mr.), "Frau" (Mrs.), or



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"Fraulein" (Miss), followed by the person's title and the last name. For example, "Herr Doktor Schmidt." This will be followed by a firm handshake on greeting and departing.

In business, the person of lesser rank will be introduced to the person of higher rank, and there is no special treatment given to women on the basis of gender. If you are introduced to a husband and wife in a social setting, it is extremely important to shake the hand of the wife first, otherwise you will be seen as rude.

Do not expect your German counterpart to be very friendly initially. It is best that you refrain from trying to become too friendly, too fast. On your first business meeting, conversation will begin with general topics. Ask questions about their company or their product to get the conversation started. Asking questions is considered a valuable trait and you will appear well educated if you do so.

Business may or may not be discussed at this initial meeting, but it is wiser to allow your German host to take the lead. This is the crucial rapport building stage and it is important that you do your homework and learn about German culture and traditions before you depart. Do not expect immediate decisions. The Germans do things methodically and they will need plenty of time to review your proposal.

Germans usually remain reserved until business is terminated and will become more informal in social settings. Men are chivalrous and will stand when a woman enters the room.

Gifts should not be exchanged at an initial meeting but are acceptable at the end of the negotiations. The gift should not be extravagant, but the well thought-out gift will always be appreciated. The Germans prefer American-made items, such as a pen or a desk set. Gifts of pointed objects such as knives, letter openers or umbrellas are considered unlucky.

What will be expected in making an important presentation to a potential client in Germany?

It will be expected that your presentation be technical and factual. Avoid humor or any hard sell approaches. It is crucial that you prepare and be capable of answering any questions in detail as to how you expect to attain your objectives.

Present your material in an orderly fashion. Attention to detail and precision are crucial components when conducting business in Germany. It is a good idea if you also present your materials translated accurately into German.

What different social norms and etiquette should I be aware of before going to Germany?

Business entertaining in Germany usually takes place in restaurants. It is considered an honor to be invited to the home of a business contact. As in most parts of the world, impeccable manners are associated with being well educated. Therefore, knowing what is expected will give you the confidence to handle any social situation that may occur.

If you are invited to the home, it is a nice gesture to bring a gift of flowers. Bring an uneven number, but the number 13 is considered unlucky and red flowers are for lovers and lilies as these are reserved for funerals. Present the bouquet unwrapped.

It is a better idea to have the flowers sent to the home on the day of the dinner party. This gives the host time to arrange the flowers

before the other guests arrive.

The meal will begin with everyone saying *Guten appetit* to their neighbor. This will be preceded by the host proposing a toast, followed by introducing the guest of honor.

A woman never proposes a toast to a man, and the "clinking of glasses" is avoided except for birthdays and other special occasions. For wine or champagne, the toast is *Zum Wohl* and for beer, the toast is *Prost*.

When dining in Germany, it is important to keep your hands on the table during the meal. This is a tradition dating back to ancient times when men carried weapons in their pockets and were likely to use them given proper provocation.

The continental style of dining is the norm but the American style of eating is also acceptable. Do not cut potatoes, pancakes or dumplings with a knife as this will be considered an insult to the host because it suggests that they are tough. It is also considered poor etiquette to eat with fingers; that includes fruit and sandwiches. Poor posture in the boardroom or the dining room will be considered a lack of breeding.

In dress, remain conservative and wear quality clothing, shoes and accessories.

Do's and Taboos:

1. Topics of conversation to avoid are politics, religion and World War II.
2. The OK gesture is considered extremely rude.
3. Always refer to what was once "East Berlin" as "Berlin" when conducting business in the East or the West.

Some words of advice from a German businessman: "Always remember to shake hands when saying goodbye whether in a business or social setting;" and "People are usually very gracious and forgiving of guests who are not aware of German protocol, but they will not forgive you for a mistake on the autobahn."

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