

A Business Edge
By Sharon L. Badenhop, Ph. D.

In today's competitive market, a company can ill afford a *faux pas*. Want an advantage that will be cost effective in your next global transaction? Learn the simple pleasantries in the native tongue, and have bilingual business cards.

Doing business globally does not require an encyclopedic knowledge of foreign customs. Even a cursory knowledge of the language can prevent distractions from getting in the way of negotiations. Further, there can be uncomfortableness with spoken English. If they like you and they feel that you like them and are interested in their culture, that matters a lot.

Even as more and more people around the world, especially in business circles, are speaking English, it would be a mistake to discount the ability to be aware of the other's native language. Wherever you are in the world, learning a few words of a host country's language not only can remove barriers, but can cement relationships and seal deals. The benefit/result is not only practical, but demonstrates to prospective business partners your interest in their country and culture. Above all, the most important element/aspect of speaking a smattering of the client's language is the respect the efforts imply! Further, having a few words at your fingertips is a helpful icebreaker. As you will most probably make mistakes, these are greeted by a laugh or a smile. "If there's any tensions or if people are a bit nervous, it lightens the situation," says Leo Seewald a partner of Goodmans LLP, Hong Kong office. But, be wary of common mistakes: Americans frequently leap into intimate conversations with foreign executives – you don't ask "How do you like your job?" instead "What's your favorite hobby?" or "How are your children?"

US companies have chosen to ignore the language gap – bilingual skills tend to be undervalued - and seldom are there company sponsored language lessons. Even if you don't speak the language fluently, an earnest effort to at least greet someone in his or her native tongue can go a long way. Mark Lokensgard, an associate professor at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, say, "Whenever somebody learns even just a little bit of someone else's language it's a recognition that people view things differently, that they feel differently about things. It shows a willingness to meet someone halfway."

If questions of language and culture are crucial to international business people, what's holding them back? The most frequent reply – Lack of time. But, what is the deal worth? And how long does it take to pick up the basics? A comparative little amount of time is required to learn some simple functional language and social expressions – expressions that can be used to greet, to thank, to apologize, to invite, to offer, to request or to decline. Committing complicated sentences to heart is unnecessary. Your time is better spent learning simple pleasantries. And often, the effort will generate more than just good will. It's a win-win situation: learning something of the local language wins clients and their appreciation of your efforts help cement the business relationship.

Can a mistake give business relations a welcome boost? Nina Quintos, a Filipina architect, gave a presentation to a client in Kuala Lumpur. “In Tagalog, *salamat* means thank you, however, in Malay, *salamat datang* means welcome. At the end of my presentation (which was well received), the last slide said *salamat datang*, which made the Malaysian audience laugh,” she says. Although she was “aghast” at her mistake, it fell far from flat. “My genuine effort to connect to them meant more than being correct.”

So please (*por favor*), leap into the global pool and learn those basics. *Merci beaucoup!*

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