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In China, many of our rules don't apply

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As our global mind-set broadens, the most valued and prepared employee will possess the skills to adapt to the customs of other cultures. It is important for Westerners to understand that what may be normal in one culture can have horrible consequences in another. Traveling to China, one of the United States' biggest trading partners, is a prime example. Here are some guidelines to help you when traveling to China for business.

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Appearance:

Conservative dress for men and women is the norm. It is best to err on the side of conservative and wear business suits rather than business casual attire. Be mindful to dress in traditional business colors of black, grey and blue. Women should avoid high- heeled shoes, short skirts (no shorter than knee length) and short-sleeved blouses. Also, women should wear subtle neutral colors and avoid colorful loud pieces of clothing. Denim is not acceptable attire for business meetings.

Behavior:

The Chinese do not speak with their hands, so it is best to avoid large hand gestures. In addition, do not point your finger at someone when emphasizing a point. It is acceptable to use an open palm in lieu of pointing a finger. Avoid personal contact, as men and women do not touch in public.

The Chinese personal zone is closer than what it is for most Westerners. Their personal zone is more similar to our intimate zone, which is up to 1.5 feet apart. Be mindful not to hug or drape an arm around someone's shoulder or slap someone on the back.

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Unlike in Western cultures, where it is appropriate to maintain eye contact 70 percent of the time, try to refrain from looking the Chinese business associates directly in the eye. Direct eye contact is seen as offensive and can undermine, if not ruin, the business relationship.

Arrive early or on time for all meetings and gathering, especially if you are the guest. The Chinese view lateness as an insult. Never ask the Chinese to turn off their cell phones in meetings. It is commonplace to answer phone calls during business meetings. Allow the Chinese to leave a meeting first.

Communication:

Introductions are formal, titles should be adhered to, and the oldest person is always greeted first. Bowing, nodding and handshakes can all be common greetings, so it is best to wait for the Chinese to offer their hand first. Be sure to stand when introductions are made and remain standing until all introductions have been concluded.

Business cards are exchanged at the time of the introduction. Present the business card with both hands and writing should be facing the recipient. Take a few seconds to read the card when presented as it is considered impolite to immediately tuck the card away. Do not put business cards in pocket or briefcase, but place the card on the table until the end of the meeting. It will be appreciated if business cards are printed with English on one side and Chinese on the other side. It is considered quite rude to write on a business card.

The Chinese value rank and seniority, and the most senior employee or member of the group should conduct the meeting. Decision-making can be a long process and you should practice patience while waiting for the final decision.

As the Chinese market becomes more successful, many Western habits are becoming more commonplace; however, the culture of Chinese business is still much different than Western cultures. Familiarizing yourself with Chinese business etiquette and a little planning on your part will go a long way in laying the foundation for a successful business relationship.

Jill Haney's Cincinnati-based business, JH Image Consulting, conducts individual and corporate group training on appearance, behavior and communication. She is a certified image consultant with the Association of Image Consultants International. Reach her at 513-505-2732, jill@jimage.net, or www.jimage.net.

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