

**BUSINESS ETIQUETTE IN LATIN AMERICA**

By Edward Chalmers.

Before heading to Latin America on business, learn how to work and play with the locals. More and more New Zealanders find themselves doing business in Southern and Central America every year. Each country, from Guatemala to Chile, has its own distinctive flair. The savvy business traveller and smart businessman will do research in advance to better understand the cultural differences that play a role in how business is conducted in this region.

**Address people correctly**

Avoid using a client, supplier or business associate's first name until you're invited to do so. Such an invitation usually won't take long, as Latinos are generally warm and friendly. In the meantime, use the more formal "Mr." or, better still, "Senor."

**Present your credentials**

Have your business card printed in English and Spanish. At any meeting, exchange business cards with everyone. Present your card with the Spanish side up.

In Brazil, use Portuguese in lieu of Spanish. And don't try your high school language knowledge on anyone. Learn some phrases of greeting in the local dialect, as a courtesy.

**Be punctual, but don't expect the same**

Be on time for your appointments and meetings, but recognize that schedules are not always strictly adhered to in much of Latin America. Latinos may be late, but it's expected that you will be punctual, particularly in Costa Rica and Chile.

**Shake and hug**

Shake hands on arrival and when leaving or ending a meeting. Your Latin associate's handshake may seem limp and will linger longer than in North America or Europe, particularly in Guatemala and El Salvador. The "abrazo," a warm embrace or hug, is common among friends everywhere except in Costa Rica.

**Curb your gestures**

The American symbol for "okay" is considered a rude gesture in Brazil. It's seen as a crude reference to female genitalia. Slapping your right fist into your left palm in Chile is also obscene. Holding your palm up with your fingers spread means "stupid" to Chileans.

Don't ruin your presentation by inadvertently including vulgar gestures, and don't fidget. It's particularly annoying to Ecuadorians when someone makes repeated movements, fiddles with his tie, or taps a pen. If you're looking for an additional source of luck in your meeting in Paraguay, don't cross your fingers. It denotes the sex act.

**Correspond correctly**

With e-mail, recognize that the use of jargon or colloquialisms could cause confusion and your tone may be misinterpreted. Business correspondence is more formal in Latin America, where the use of elegant language denotes good manners.

On the subject of language, ensure that your translations are properly done. When planning product specifications, remember the story of Chevrolet's attempt to promote a new car called the Chevy Nova. No one anticipated that, in Latin America, it would be seen as "No va" (which translates roughly into "won't go"). The car was quickly renamed the Caribe.

**Adapt to their personal space**

When speaking, you'll notice that Latinos tend to stand very close. Expect a lot of casual arm touching, shoulder patting and back rubbing. This is usually a good sign when it's coming from a business associate. And don't be surprised if you see men walking down the street with linked arms. That, too, is an indication the business relationship is strong.

Nonetheless, make sure the familiarity is initiated by a Latino. Never try to force a friendship -- in Latin America or anywhere. You'll be discounted as phony and untrustworthy, and your business image will be tarnished.

**Don't push business talk**

Most Latinos and Latinas take their main meal at midday. Some go home for lunch, particularly in Argentina. Dinners are purely social. If business is to be discussed, let your Latin American host or guest bring it up, and don't be surprised if this doesn't occur until well after dessert.

**Let the host toast**

In most parts of Latin America, it is customary for the host to make the first toast. Raise your glass when you're being toasted and reciprocate by saying "Salud!" before your glass touches the table again.

In Venezuela, the visitor makes the first toast. It's a nice touch to do it in Spanish, but memorize some phrasing in advance so that you don't ruin your image by saying the wrong things.

**Foot the bill**

In a business setting, the one who extended the invitation is the one who pays. The exception to this rule is in Colombia, where the guest is expected to offer to pay. The host will generally win the ensuing verbal tug-of-war, but play along anyway.

**Be polite**

Wait until your host takes his seat before sitting down at the table. In Panama, your host will sit at the opposite end of the table. In other countries, you will usually be directed where to sit.

Always stand when a lady joins or leaves the table, and don't eat until everyone is served. Here's a surprisingly different thing to remember: keep your hands on the table, not in your lap, when dining with Latin Americans.

In Brazil, use your knife, never your fork, to cut your food, no matter how tender it looks. Never pour wine with your left hand. It is uncouth and insulting. Try the local food, but never eat in the street, not even if you're rushing from one meeting to another.

**Be patient with business associates**

Appointments are necessary. You would be wise to arrange business meetings two to four weeks in advance. Be prepared for a long business day -- it is not unusual for businessmen in South America to work until early evening.

Negotiations may appear difficult, and it's wise to get everything in writing. Ensure you are meeting with the decision-makers, otherwise your contract or bid approval may take much longer than anticipated as it will have to make its way up the corporate hierarchy

**Don't be pushy**

In all Latin American countries, it is expected that any business discussion will be preceded by social conversation. You must build a friendly relationship first if you hope for any success in negotiating a business deal.

Avoid a hard-sell approach. You don't want to risk failure by creating resentment. It's also important to make and retain eye contact if you want to be seen as trustworthy.



### **Converse cautiously**

Let your hosts control the conversation, particularly in Venezuela. Recognize that Brazilians interrupt a lot. It's a sign of enthusiasm, not bad manners. Wherever your business takes you in Central or South America, speak softer than usual. Latinos equate loud voices with brashness and a lack of refinement.

### **Show gratitude with gifts**

In Brazil, Chile and Nicaragua, a gift is not expected at the first meeting. Arrange to buy lunch or dinner. Don't go empty-handed to your second visit, though.

It's customary to offer a gift at your first encounter in Bolivia, Colombia and Costa Rica. Be sensitive to any sort of gift that could be misconstrued as an attempted bribe, however.

When you are given a gift, be effusive with your thanks, particularly in Ecuador. A follow-up thank you note is expected in Latin America more than anywhere else in the world.

### **Offer the right flowers**

When sending flowers, choose them carefully. Each country has different flowers that are traditionally used for funerals, so it would give entirely the wrong impression if they were included in a "Thank You" bouquet. In Costa Rica, it's calla lilies; in Ecuador, it's lilies or marigolds. Never send purple flowers in Brazil or white ones in El Salvador or Guatemala.

If your assistant generally calls your local florist to wire flowers to business associates on your behalf, relay this information to avoid a very negative effect on your relationships and career.

### **Shoulder the blame**

If you feel you may have offended someone, take the time to apologize even if you don't think you've done anything that's actually wrong. Don't let a misunderstanding or your ego negatively impact your professional image.

Always give someone an "out" to avoid embarrassment, by explaining something again in different words and graciously blaming yourself for any miscommunication.

### **Be tactful**

Be conscious of other people's feelings at all times. Think before you speak, and avoid saying or doing anything that might be construed as personal criticism or negativity towards someone's country or culture.

For example, in Colombia, bull fighting is popular. So don't be disrespectful of the sport, regardless of your personal feelings regarding it. Make small talk about geography and culture, not politics.

It's always considered good form in Latin America to ask about your associate's family. You will be a welcome business visitor if you make a point of remembering the names and ages of your their children.

### **Listen and learn**

Doing business in another country creates both a challenge and an opportunity as one climbs the corporate ladder. Rid yourself of any preconceived notions about South American stereotypes. Be respectful of the people you meet, listen more than you speak, and follow their lead and you'll establish a strong business relationship.

Recognize cultural differences between countries. If you had a successful meeting and business dinner in Santiago, never assume that the exact same techniques will work in Quito. Educate yourself on local customs for the sake of your professional image, your business success and your career advancement.