

Tips for “Gringos” Conducting Business South of the Border!

If countries in Latin America and the Caribbean are not at the top of your list for business opportunities, maybe they should be. There are some great advantages to conducting business in Latin America. With China becoming more expensive by the day, our southern neighbors are now able to compete on price and offer many advantages over Asia. Time zone, culture and proximity to North America are some. Below are some cultural tips that will aid in success there:

- Most speak Spanish, except in Brazil where the national language is Portuguese. There are some country to country differences in the Spanish language in Latin America. Some words that are offensive in one country are acceptable in others.
- 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.
- 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”
- In all Latin countries, the attitude toward time is less rigid than among North Americans. Delays should not be a surprise. Do not show up on time for a social event, arrive at least 30 minutes late.
- Latinos will usually stand closer together during conversations, so be prepared for that plus casual touching and, of course, the “abrazo”, or embrace, among good friends.
- Latinos are very warm and friendly people and enjoy social conversation before getting down to business. This is a calculated process aimed at getting to know you personally and become friends. Latinos tend to be more interested in you, the person, than you as a representative of some faceless corporation.
- Avoid using a 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 even better “Señor”. If your associate has a title, use it.
- Wait until your host takes his seat before sitting down at the table. 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.
- 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
- 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.
- It's always considered good form in Latin America to ask about your associate's family and remember such details as the names and ages of children.

About Mark Hehl

Mark Hehl's career spans over 30 years and includes leadership roles in international operations, technology transfer, quality, reliability, cost reduction, supply chain improvement and lead time reduction in many industries in North America, Europe, Asia and Latin America. As a past executive for the Timex Corporation, Mark implemented Six Sigma at major suppliers in China, Latin America and at other worldwide corporate facilities. In recognition of his contributions, these Chinese suppliers honored him with the award of the Chinese name 何文楷 "Ho Man Kai", which is Cantonese for "good and knowledgeable".

Mark was a Delegate and featured presenter at the II CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL DE CALIDAD (Second International Quality Congress) in Quito, Ecuador and at the Third China-American Quality Symposium held in Shanghai, China. He has also authored over 15 technical papers on various Business Process Improvement & International Business Development subjects and is writing a book titled Improving Your Operations in Emerging Countries. Mr. Hehl has a working knowledge of Spanish.

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