

Long Island Business NEWS

Where Business Gets Down to Business



Global customs are on the agenda at the Dowling School of Business, according to Interim Dean

When In Rome

By Ambrose Clancy

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Want to literally make a buck in China? Give your Chinese counterpart a clock upon meeting.

If the principal of a Latin American firm is late for a meeting, just chill – but if you're late for a meeting in France, you're out of luck.

Oh, and when doing business in India, expect your opposite to be an extremely close talker.

In the age of globalization, Long Island businesspeople and institutes of higher learning are spreading the word about proper overseas business etiquette – not just to spare themselves from looking like idiots, but to close deals quickly, efficiently and profitably.

Frank Pellegrino, a vice president of Farmingdale's Smart Sourcing, which facilitates American firms seeking to outsource manufacturing to China, noted that gift-giving is de rigeur when meeting a Chinese businessperson for the first time. You literally make a dollar if you give your counterpart a clock, which can be taken as a symbol of death; gifting a clock forces your Chinese colleague to hand you a dollar in return, changing the clock from a gift to a purchase and thereby removing bad portents.

Pellegrino knows what he's talking about, having traveled to China two or three times a year for more than a decade. Circumstances have changed remarkably in China from his first visit, which he made with his 12-year-old daughter, whom locals would politely stop in the street, because most had never seen a Western child.

Recently returned from a seven-week visit to Smart Sourcing offices in Shanghai and Ningbo, Pellegrino noted that today, most Chinese people are bilingual and language is not a problem – but culture must be considered above all else when doing business in the planet's most populous market.

Culture class

Respecting a 5,000-year-old culture that is, at times, completely different from ours is essential. This is especially true in understanding the concept of "guanxi," loosely translated as "relationships," which in China are "much more important than contracts or agreements," according to Pellegrino.

Doing business face-to-face is a concrete method of respecting a relationship. A deal involving a Long Islander and someone in St. Louis can involve phone calls, e-mails, a few overnighted samples and a faxed contract, without the parties ever meeting. But that would never happen in China, where something as simple as exchanging business cards is an elaborate ritual.

“You do it standing, holding your card out using both hands so it can be read,” Pellegrino said.

The Chinese businessperson will put the card on the meeting table, he added, and if there is more than one American visitor, the cards will be lined up according to rank. While the ritual is important, “the Chinese are very understanding of foreigners,” Pellegrino noted. “The key is to always, always show respect.”

Josselyn Tortillo is working on a double major at Adelphi University, studying accounting and international studies with the hope of landing a position with an accounting firm doing work in Latin America. The 21-year-old El Salvador native has been in the U.S. for eight years, and she knows that just as culture must be respected in China, the same is true in Central and South America – but Latin American politics and societies must also be understood to affect a good business relationship.

South of the border, “economic, political and social forces are all connected,” Tortillo said. “Political issues are very important because they affect economic forces and must be understood.”

Dr. Raysa E. Amador, director of languages and international studies at Adelphi, said more than 33 Adelphi business majors are enrolled in foreign language courses, which are not required for a business degree. Business school graduates with foreign languages and international studies on their résumés move to the head of the line with corporate human resources executives, according to Amador, a native of Cuba.

An Adelphi Spanish course and one in French are specifically tailored to business students, she noted. Students learn technological language and terminology involving accounting and finance, and how to act in certain situations. For instance, Europeans are generally as warm as Americans, but handle themselves with more formality, Amador said – and while coming off as a bluff, hearty character with a good line will work for stateside business, it will only baffle prospective European clients and partners.

“Be polite and punctual in France, and be polite in Latin America, but realize there that timing of meetings can be flexible,” she said, adding that while English has become the world language, speaking a few words in the local language shows respect and is a fast-track opening to doing business.



It's all about the “guanxi” in China, says Frank Pellegrino (right) of Farmingdale's Smart Sourcing.

Sobering thoughts

If you're looking to do business in a variety of foreign climes, Dowling College might be able to help you in the coming months. Elana Zolfo, interim dean of Dowling's School of Business, said that about eight language and culture courses for the business-minded are set to launch in the 2008 spring semester.

"We'll study the business etiquette of various countries – what to eat, what to do, what to do after the business day is over and the general culture," Zolfo said.

In Korea and Japan, for example, more often than not, after-work gatherings involve binge drinking marathons. Some Korean and Japanese companies find it insulting if Americans want to beg off from getting blind. "They'll expect you to participate," Zolfo said.

Making it easier on the American business traveler is a sea change in attitude, with Western business etiquette now influencing Asia. Instead of drinking parties to seal deals, some firms are turning to sporting events such as golf outings and other nonalcoholic activities. This is due to more women occupying Asian boardrooms, Zolfo said, and their notion that getting trashed in the middle of male-bonding blowouts is not their cup of sake.

Asian businesswomen are changing their culture in other ways, too, especially in the arena of sexual harassment. "There have been several highly visible cases which women have pursued and won, even at the risk of being ostracized by their families," Zolfo said.

Hurling onward around the globe, Dowling students will also learn about Indian cultures – key, with so many tech jobs and connections heading there. Westerners, for instance, are often unfamiliar with Indian food, which can be highly seasoned and produce powerful aromas; knowing this in advance can prevent embarrassing expressions when a plate of five-alarm lamb vindaloo is presented.

Students will also be reminded that Indians have a different sense of space. When meeting someone who shakes hands to the point where your noses are almost touching, Zolfo warns, don't think you've strayed into an old "Seinfeld" episode.

It's just their way.