



Quick Tips : International

Avoiding 'Commercial Harakari'

How to prevent Western and Japanese business cultures colliding

- 1** Better to forget your underwear than your business cards ('meishi'). To do business in Japan, you need business cards. Shoving them across the table with a "Hi, I'm Steve" would be akin to doing a moonie to your new parents-in-law. It is worth practicing the meishi ritual before you meet your key contacts. Show great care and respect exchanging the cards; taking your time to present your card with two hands, the writing turned so that the receiver can read it and then slowly and humbly review the cards that you are given in return. If your cards also have your name in Katakana script, (syllabic characters used for italics/foreign words), you'll make it a whole lot easier for everyone, particularly if you know how your name gets 'translated'. Announcing your name as 'SuMiSu Se-Ra' (Sarah Smith) or 'Ki-GaN KeBiN' (Kevin Keegan) will help minimise confusion.
- 2** Saving face ('kao). The answer is 'yes'. Embarrassing your contact is unforgivable. For a typical Japanese, it is far easier to agree than disagree. Anne Robinson style questioning is 'face damaging'. Avoid blunt questions "What's wrong with xyz?", unless you want to be deemed uncouth and aggressive, and get duff answers. Instead, politely ask a leading negative question "Please help me, looking at the figures on this report, it looks like we may have a problem with xyz, is my understanding correct?", this allows a 'yes' and then the details can be discussed with no one 'losing face'.
- 3** Surprises damage good relationships ('Go-en'). As well as the numerous opportunities for everyday social faux pas, there are classic negotiating ones that 'Gaijin' (foreigners) make. James Westerner is in Tokyo for five days to close a sale that his local contact has been introducing on his behalf, James flies home that evening. The Japanese buying team has commented on the price. Eager to close the deal, the proverbial trousers are dropped and a 35% discount is given. Imagine James' surprise when the Japanese then decide to walk away. Why? Because the relationship has been damaged, if you can drop your price by 35% you were overcharging, therefore we cannot trust you. Next time, give some freebies instead; free training, extra time evaluating before starting charging etc.
- 4** What's in a name? A lot when it comes to 'Sama', 'San', 'Chan' and 'Kun'. Typically people are referred to by their surname plus one of these honorific suffixes, which act instead of Mr, Mrs, Miss etc., In Japanese, the order of the names are switched, the family name goes first. 'Sama' is very polite, used for customers, spouses etc. 'San' is the most common suffix used in business. You'll hear lots of Yamamoto-san and Takahashi-san. 'Chan' is used for close relatives after their title (literally Mother-chan) or private name for children (Keiko-chan) and younger siblings etc. 'Kun' is used solely by men referring to more junior men that they know well. The exception? When you talk about yourself or your family members etc just use your surname then first name; unless you want to look like a prima donna. Don't be surprised if the Japanese drop the 'san' when talking about their colleagues to clients or to you, work is extended family.
- 5** The hierarchy is set; work with the Vertical society ('Tate Shakai'). We all know that it is unwise to upset the boss' Executive Assistant. Similarly, bear in mind that decisions are made by consensus at the more junior levels and then passed to the senior managers. It is not unusual for senior staff to fall asleep, or feign sleep in meetings; dependent on the circumstances this can be totally acceptable in Japanese culture. It could be because they are testing you, demonstrating their complete trust in their staff or just plain tired from karaoke the night before! If you politely ignore this, see point 2, it won't impact your results. The people that really need to listen will be listening, including those that just happen to speak your native tongue but haven't got round to letting you know it yet!

An interesting bit of linguistics in closing ...'Gambatte Kudasai' is used to wish people luck, the literal translation is please ('Kudasai') work hard ('gambatte'); what does that tell you about the Japanese work ethic?

Gambatte Kudasai, Gaijin!



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We look forward to hearing from you.