

Business Etiquette in the Philippines

by Christina Hamlett, Demand Media



Always send a thank-you note following a hosted meal.

If you come from a culture where you're accustomed to conducting most of your important business by phone or email and making decisions on the spot, you'll need to apply the brakes if negotiations take you to the Philippines. Experts in Filipino culture such as Maida Pineda and Paul Rodell advise that business transactions -- as well as interpersonal relationships -- move at a pace that is both formal and leisurely. Filipinos place a high value on trust and ascribe to the belief that good things come to those who practice patience.

Business Meetings

If you're scheduling a meeting with associates in the Philippines, it's not uncommon to make arrangements as far as a month ahead of time. As a professional courtesy, always confirm the date by phone a few days prior and provide advance copies of whatever materials are necessary to clarify and enhance the objectives of the meeting. According to Asiatype, Inc.'s "Doing Business in the Philippines 2008," even if your company has had a longstanding relationship with a Filipino business, you'll be treated like a newcomer if it's the first time they've met you in person. This occurs, for instance, if you're replacing someone or have just been hired. Punctuality is paramount in getting meetings underway even though actual negotiations may move at a snail's pace.

Introductions

If you're the visitor, it's customary to offer your business card first. Be aware, however, that you may not get one in return if your rank isn't comparable to or higher than your Filipino

recipient. As with other Asian cultures, business cards are presented face up with both hands. When you receive a card, take a thoughtful moment to study it before pocketing it. Always greet the oldest or highest-ranking person at the meeting first. Firm handshakes are standard protocol in the Filipino community and individuals are addressed by their titles and surnames until such time as familiarity has been established.

Conversations

The strong emphasis in the Filipino culture on fostering warm relationships with others often leads them to be overly inquisitive when it comes to conversations with strangers. As travel experts Alfredo and Grace Roces point out in their book, "Culture Shock! Philippines: A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette," your Filipino colleagues and new acquaintances aren't being aggressively nosy when they ask you about your family history, your marital status, or the names of your children and how they're doing in school. They're simply inquiring about the same things that occupy the center of their own universe. As Paul Rodell discusses in his book, "Culture and Customs of the Philippines," Filipinos are quite well versed on American pop culture and it's not unusual for business meetings to end with 15 to 20 minutes of social chatter about what's new. "Losing face" is shameful in Filipino society; accordingly, they don't like to show anger, raise their voices, engage in debates or get pushed to make hasty decisions.

Eating

Light refreshments are often served at business meetings; never offend your host by declining, even if you've just had a big breakfast or lunch before you arrived. In restaurants as well as private homes, always follow the lead of your host and wait to be instructed where to sit and -- if it's a buffet -- when to start helping yourself to the food. While many Asian cultures believe that leaving a small portion of food on your plate at the end of the meal is a show of respect, Filipinos really don't mind if you show your appreciation by finishing every last bite. Always follow up with a written thank-you for being invited.

Gifts

If you're going to give a gift to a Filipino colleague, keep in mind that a lot of weight is given to how beautifully it is packaged. This is a direct reflection of the amount of thought and time you have put into the gesture. In other words, don't just stick your present in a paper bag and say, "Here." Because there are no color prohibitions in terms of wrapping papers and ribbons, the more festive the better. Just don't be disappointed when your gift isn't unwrapped until after you've left. Outside the family circle, Filipinos consider gift-giving a private affair and don't want to hurt the feelings of those present who aren't getting anything. Gifts such as books, small electronics and items unique to your own country are appropriate business gifts. If you're invited to a colleague's home, flowers (with the exception of lilies and chrysanthemums) are always appreciated. As far as edible gifts, stick to candy. To bring anything other than that will be construed as an insult that you think the household is poor.

References

- "Culture Shock! Philippines: A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette"; Alfredo R. Roces, Grace Roces; 2009
- "Dos & Don'ts in the Philippines"; Maida Pineda; 2005
- "Culture and Customs of the Philippines"; Paul A. Rodell; 2008
- "Doing Business in the Philippines 2008"; Asiatype, Inc.; 2009

About the Author

Ghostwriter and film consultant Christina Hamlett has written professionally since 1970. Her credits include many books, plays, optioned features, articles and interviews. Publishers include HarperCollins, Michael Wiese Productions, "PLAYS," "Writer's Digest" and "The Writer." She holds a B.A. in communications (emphasis on audience analysis and message design) from California State University, Sacramento. She also travels extensively and is a gourmet chef.

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