The Star Alliance Network × Monocle

A Global Guide to Business Etiquette

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A Meeting of Minds:
25 tips for international business networking

Every day, the Star Alliance network is responsible for 18,100 flights transporting 1.2m people to 975 global destinations. When travelling for business, cultural and local knowledge smooths the way for mutual understanding and strong commercial relationships. The joint expertise of the world’s best airlines makes achieving this a seamless affair; below are a few pointers to set you on the right track.

01: JAPAN
Save the best seat for the boss: in taxis and private rides alike, the Japanese observe a strict hierarchical seating plan where the best seat in a taxi is behind the driver. If your customer’s driving, the highest-ranked person must sit alongside to show respect.

02: INDIA
In India, punctuality varies according to where you are. Traffic in Mumbai means that being slightly late is more acceptable than in a government city like Delhi, which operates like clockwork. Check the local custom before you arrive.

03: RUSSIA
In Russia, women do not normally expect to be greeted during introductions. This is changing as more people travel, however, so be ready to follow your host’s lead.

04: CANADA
In Canada, drinking alcohol is not usual during business lunches. Stick to water unless your host suggests otherwise.
05: CHINA
In China, taste everything you’re offered during meals – but never clear your plate as your host will assume you’re still hungry. Don’t talk business during meals.

06: INDIA
Indians don’t like to say no to a request. If they are unable to do something, you are unlikely to get a direct refusal. Similarly, use tact and subtlety if you need to explain why a business proposal is not possible.

07: JAPAN
In Japan, always have a business card close to hand. And when an associate gives you their card, handle it with care.

08: USA
Americans like to be relaxed and those in charge are keen to relive the easygoing business practices of the 1960s. So drop the formality but, of course, keep your manners.

09: CHINA
Using only a forefinger is an empty gesture in China: making a point requires the whole hand. Don’t go further than that though – a back-slap is considered inappropriate.
10: China
In China, starters are served as several small dishes on a plate. Start from the left and eat your way to the right, as the flavour of dishes increases in intensity along the way.

11: Brazil
Don’t put your briefcase or bag on the ground in Brazil: national security measures have informed the national psyche, so place it on a chair or a hook.

12: Middle East
Women can avoid embarrassment in the Middle East by waiting to follow their male host’s lead when being introduced. Women might not be taken seriously at first, and some men may place their own hand on their chest rather than taking yours.

13: Sweden
Be prepared for a detailed debate in Sweden: the Scandinavians love a meeting. Push it forward by setting dates, tasks and times, and don’t be surprised if a further meeting is required. Once something is agreed upon, it’s carried out with speed and efficiency.

14: Japan
Always turn up on time: if you arrive a minute past the appointed hour it is considered strange, five minutes is a cause for concern. There is no word for “late” in Japanese.

15: Sweden
Toasting in Sweden involves eye contact but no glass-touching. A “skol” and a nod to everyone will do the trick.
16 : SINGAPORE
___ In Singapore, modesty is key. Overconfident behaviour will not impress and will not produce good working relationships.

17 : GERMANY
___ At mealtimes in Germany, fold your napkin at the left side of your plate when you are done, and lay your cutlery parallel on your plate, with the handles on the right-hand side, to show you have finished.

18 : USA
___ In the US be ready to produce proof of your identity. Increased security means photo ID is required to access many office buildings, so don’t be offended when you’re asked.

19 : UK
___ In the UK, small talk is an essential preamble to business talk. The weather, the surroundings or the day’s events are all acceptable topics. After skirting round the real reason you’ve met, everyone will be happy to attend to the matter in hand professionally.

20 : CHINA
___ Don’t say no to a glass of baiju, the Chinese liquor of choice that is served at all formal dinners. But drink with restraint: draining your glass will result in a refill. Leaving it half-full is perfectly acceptable.
21: THAILAND
In Thailand, don’t touch or pass anything over a person’s head, as in Thai culture the head is sacred. However, people often stand very close and touch each other on the arm when talking. Pointing is done with an open right hand, and beckoning with the palm facing downward and a waggle of the fingers.

22: NORWAY
Norwegians like to talk directly and deliberately. They tend to stick to the facts, and do not like being rushed.

23: DENMARK
In Denmark, women are greeted before the men. Danes tend to use only their first names. Personal hellos and goodbyes are required for everyone present.

24: CHINA
Like Japan, China places great emphasis on seating hierarchy. The leader of your delegation will be seated at a round table next to the leader of theirs, and the pattern will follow all the way down.

25: FRANCE
The French sometimes give their surnames first when being formally introduced, and it can be considered rude to call a colleague by their first names. To avoid confusion, find out their names beforehand. Use “vous” rather than “tu”, unless invited otherwise, and never use “mademoiselle” to address a grown woman.