

Altitude

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DOING Business WITH THE JAPANESE

By Tamiko E Warden.

When most people picture negotiations in Japan, they picture a row of Japanese in matching dark suits with inscrutable Oriental faces, watching in deadly silence. I've sat on both sides of the table during my four years in business in Japan, and the Japanese are often equally confused - they just don't show it. But here are a few pointers to help make your business dealings in Japan more fruitful and enjoyable.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK. Japan is one of the most information-intensive countries in the world. Know the people on the other side of the table and their business as well as you can. Bring lots of information for their perusal - company brochures, sales brochures and trade magazine articles are all excellent.

BRING LOTS OF BUSINESS CARDS. It never fails to astonish foreigners how many business cards you need in Japan. Bring four to five times what you think you need. There is a special etiquette to business cards known as "meishi kokan". Present the card facing the receiver. Receive his card with both hands and look at it carefully (even if it doesn't make much sense). Do not put it in your pocket - place it in your cardholder. If you are in a meeting put the

cards in front of you on the table. Address people by their last name, adding "san" - for example, "Yamada-san".

DON'T BE INFORMAL. First names are not used in Japan unless they offer a "nickname". Don't joke around or roll up your shirtsleeves. Be polite and save your jokes for the evening entertainment.

CHECK, RE-CHECK AND CONFIRM. This is common practice in Japan and it always helps to periodically clarify your understanding (or what you think theirs is) of the situation. You will not be seen as mistrusting or too detail-oriented. I will often stop at a certain part of a

meeting and say, "if my understanding is correct... Please let me know if I have misunderstood anything". This can go a long way to avoiding problems.

YES MEANS YES, AND YES MEANS NO. "Hai" in Japanese is wonderfully vague and has a number of meanings. When someone answers "hai" do not assume it means yes. It may mean "I hear you" or "Yes, I'm in agreement with what you say". Nods do not mean yes either.

HIRE A TRANSLATOR FOR STICKY NEGOTIATIONS. I have often seen translators (or some poor soul pressed into translating) omit crucial sentences or change the nuance of expressions. If you have something important to say, make sure you bring a translator to say it for you and brief him or her before the meeting. Even with my ten years experience in the Japanese language, I would occasionally bring in a translator for sticky issues (e.g. cancelling a contract). English is a very direct language and a good businessman knows the value of precise communication. The Japanese language is anything but precise.

BE HUMBLE. Don't toot your horn and boast about yourself or your company's capabilities. An understated approach



Asakusa Kannon temple and stalls, Tokyo, Japan

is always best. Don't be afraid to say that you don't know or don't understand (unless it is about your own company). I have seen experienced senior negotiators start out by saying they don't understand how something works, when you know perfectly well that they do. Often they are testing to see if you know the facts.

UNDERSTAND "TATAMAE" AND "HONNE". "Tatamae" is what people say to smooth the waters, or because they think it's what you want to hear. "Honne" is how they really feel and you will only hear this after getting to know them. Try to distinguish what you are hearing.

TAKE YOUR TIME. Negotiations in Japan are a slow business. They are first testing to see if they can trust you, regardless of how wonderful the opportunity looks. If you are in a hurry, you won't get anywhere. Granted, things move faster than ten years ago but what takes two weeks in the western world may take four to six times as long in Japan. Trust that when Japanese say "go" it means they are fully prepared.

ENJOY THE SILENCES. Be prepared. Silence in Japan can be unnerving during a meeting but don't fill it. Give people time to respond. Silence means many things: they are listening and thinking, they need time to respond, or merely are digesting your information. Use silence yourself, it is an effective tactic.

AVOID IDIOMS. Be careful not to use any slang or specific sports references. They will not be understood - unless they are golf or baseball. Don't be complicated. Speak clearly and succinctly - most people have some grasp of English. Don't concentrate on the best English speaker either - it's often the silent fellow with white hair at the back of the room who finalises the decision.

UNDERSTAND THE HIERARCHY. Though decision-making is becoming more streamlined, decisions in Japan are still often made in consensus. Understand that no one person has the decision-making power, and address the full team. Treat every person with respect - it may be hard to decipher who can influence final decisions.

ENTERTAINING. Budgets are not as large as previous years, but after-hours entertainment is still a crucial step in your negotiation. Don't discuss business - they are using this time to get to know you. Have fun - sing karaoke, drink beer and relax. I had one negotiation where our distributor refused to pay for a local promotion. After one night of drinking, we sent him the invoice for the promotion. He paid, and neither of us mentioned it again.

ABOVE ALL, ENJOY YOURSELF. Japan may seem like a labyrinth, but don't get too caught up in it. Read a few books on the country's culture, take an interest in what there is to offer and your hosts will respond in kind.