

SOME IMPORTANT BASICS:

To the Canadian businessperson approaching the Japanese market, doing business in Japan can look deceptively familiar. Japanese business practices appear Westernized. In fact, however, the Japanese have “Japanized” Western business practice. Many fundamental differences exist. Failure to recognize these differences will dull your company’s competitive edge.

Compared to Canada, Japanese business relationships can be summed up in one phrase: Less Contract – More Contract. At the core of Japanese business is the human element: personal relationships are the foundation of relationships between organizations. As international competition to break into the Japanese market intensifies, Canadian firms can gain a distinct advantage through knowledge of the Japanese business culture essential to establishing and maintaining effective and profitable relationships. The values, customs and expectations that inform the way the Japanese conduct business form the “cultural software”. The effective application of this “cultural software” is the key to success.

Below are some of the common preconceptions Japanese bring with them when they interact with North America business people, followed by explanations and solutions.

曖昧さ *Aimai-sa*: Ambiguity

“North Americans are too direct and demand everything be stated plainly. They misinterpret or miss the point entirely when we try to express things indirectly.”

Ambiguity and avoidance of confrontation are inescapable features of Japanese communication. Messages are more subtle and often rely on context and cultural “markers” in order to be understood. Misinterpretation of such messages is inevitable when Canadians apply their own “cultural software” to communication with Japanese.

The Japanese “no” is a common source of such confusion. In contrast to popular belief, the Japanese do say “no”. Refusals, however, often arrive heavily cloaked in ambiguous language, non-verbal communication and other clues, which are clearly understood among the Japanese, but send mixed messages to Canadians. Some of these phrases are:

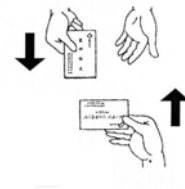
- It is a bit difficult...
- We will examine this matter in a forward-looking manner...
- Of course, reaching a decision will take time...

The Japanese “yes”, can prove to be no less confusing. The Japanese tend to listen in a much more interactive fashion. They do this through frequent nodding and verbal acknowledgements such as the word, “hai”. This term is often translated directly as “yes” and can easily give the impression that your Japanese counterpart is in complete agreement with everything you say. It is important not read any more meaning in this expression than, “yes, I am listening”.

名刺 *Meishi*: The Business Card

“North Americans are too informal. They don’t appreciate the formalities that underlie the way we do business.”

In every aspect, Japanese society is based upon hierarchy and respect. Customs and rituals are not mere formalities as we might label them, but rather bind Japanese society together. An important example is the business card exchange or *meishi kokan*. For the foreign businessperson, it creates a crucial first impression. The way you present and receive a *meishi* (business card) demonstrates respect for your Japanese counterpart and is a positive reflection of your commitment to cooperation.



The *meishi* is an extension of you and your organization. When giving or receiving *meishi*, handle them with care! Do not bend them, put them in your back pocket or write on them (in the presence of others).

Important considerations regarding the care and handling of *meishi* include:

- Keep them in a suitable carrying case (not your wallet)
- Make sure those you present are crisp and clean
- Translate them into Japanese – it is important to clearly communicate your status within your company

In a meeting, you can line the business cards up on the table in front of you to remember the names of your Japanese counterparts. After the meeting, you can use the business cards as a “data bank”: note the date and circumstances of the meeting, your counterpart’s hobbies and interests, points for future discussion and pronunciation of difficult names. The Japanese may signal the end of the meeting by collecting up the cards you have given them.

Meishi Kokan : The Business Card Ritual

- Present your card Japanese-side up
- Offer a shallow bow as you extend your card
- Receive the other card with both hands to show respect, or with your left hand if it is a simultaneous exchange
- Hold the card you have received with both hands
- Make a display of carefully regarding the card and verify the name out loud. Use your counterpart’s family name with either Mr., Ms., or *-san*
- You do not have to put the card(s) away immediately; use them in the meeting to remember names

Formalities, protocol and rituals also apply to many other business and social situations in Japan:

- Meetings
- Dining
- Gift-giving
- Socializing
- Client service
- Entertaining a guest
- Negotiation
- Seating arrangements
- Signing contracts

間 **Ma: The Grammar of Silence**

“North Americans monopolize the conversation. They don’t listen. They constantly interrupt – even when we aren’t speaking!”

Westerners also have a tendency to be uncomfortable with any extended pause in a conversation, and will jump in if this occurs. Feeling that silence signals the breakdown of communication, Canadians often strive to fill these uncomfortable gaps, thereby running the risk of appearing aggressive or even empty-headed. One Japanese proverb states: *“Those who know do not speak – those who speak do not know”*.

In Japan, silence is an integral part of the communication process – something to be shared and appreciated. Coupled with the difficulties that many Japanese have in speaking English, there may be many opportunities where the foreign listener will be tempted to hijack the conversation. It is important to remember that silence is not symptomatic of the death of communication. Silence can serve as:

- a time for thoughtful analysis of a situation, and consideration of how to proceed
- a bonding element – “words separate – silence unifies”
- an indication of respectful listening and consideration of what has been said
- a period for processing English input and formulating a response

Some tips when conducting a conversation in English with a Japanese counterpart:

- Don’t commandeer the conversation in order to “get it moving”
- Be patient: pay attention and allow the Japanese speaker to steer the conversation and set the pace
- Recognize that passivity and patience are seen as a kind of eloquence in Japan
- Don’t confuse shyness or reluctance to speak or answer a direct question with absence of an opinion or a lack of intelligence or interest
- Don’t misinterpret the differing discourse style of a Japanese conversation as being directionless

A Checklist: Some Useful Considerations for Your Trip to Japan

- Make sure to take enough bilingual business cards and keep them with you at all times.
- Have the answers; take lots of back-up information, company information pamphlets and have Japanese translations at hand.
- If you require a translator for negotiations, arrange your own. This a critical position and should not be controlled by the other side
- Brush up on current events and trends in Japan. This will make conversation easier and more productive.
- Take appropriate gifts: these should reflect either Canada or your company. Quality is important, as is careful gift wrapping.
- Pack some pocket handkerchiefs: the Japanese carry these since washrooms often don’t provide hand towels.

- ❑ Green tea is frequently served during meetings. Remember that it contains a healthy amount of caffeine - don't drink too much if you are sensitive to its effects.
- ❑ Take new socks or stockings: socializing may involve a traditional Japanese restaurant where a worn-out sock will be difficult to hide! Take extra socks and stockings since tatami mat floors can be hard on them.
- ❑ Provide your staff with pre-departure business culture and protocol training: it provides the tools to build a professional image and maintain successful relationships. Training is an essential part of your company's investment in Japan.