

Business Meetings

Timeliness

Because time is considered the most valuable resource, it is inexcusable to be late for a meeting with a customer (because your hosts may need a little time to come to you after their previous meeting, it is acceptable to be a few minutes late). If you are delayed through reasons that are beyond your control, you should do everything possible to alert your host that you are delayed.

Attire

When visiting customers, American business people usually try to match the expected way the customer will be dressed. In the high tech industry, the dress code is usually "business casual", which is somewhere between business suits and jeans. Representatives of Financial Services companies will probably wear business suits.

Titles

It is common to use first names in business conversations, regardless of age and status. Americans always introduce themselves with their full name.

Meetings start with an introduction of all participants, and business cards are exchanged. Academic titles and degrees are not shown on business cards in the United States, with exception of doctoral degrees (PhD). Please note that the size of the American business cards is different from the ones used in Europe, so if you want business cards especially for use in the United States, then it is best to have them printed there.

Discussion

To create a relaxed atmosphere there is a brief general discussion about non-controversial topics, such as the weather, business, the economy, or sports. Then the meeting gets down to business, starting with confirming the purpose and the agenda for the meeting.

In general, during business discussions certain topics such as politics, religion and racial issues are better avoided. Compliments to female executives that would be normal in other countries, are considered inappropriate in the US business environment. Talking about the economy, your industry and sports is usually safe.

Although all business meetings are in the English language, please note that there is a difference between American English and British English. Americans, in some cases, spell words differently, pronounce them differently, or words sometimes have a different meaning. Typical American expressions, many based on sports analogy, such as "hitting it out of the ball park" and "it's a touchdown", are sometimes not even understood by people from Britain. Some expressions have the opposite meaning. For example, the expression "to table a proposal" in American English means to remove it from consideration. In British English it means to bring it up for discussion. This may lead to considerable confusion. Also some innocent words in British English have an undesirable meaning in American English.

The meeting ends with a "wrap up", a very American term, in which the agreed actions are summarized.

Follow-up

After the initial contacts, it may help to invite your customer contact for lunch, which creates a relaxed atmosphere for a business discussion. Concerning dinner invitations: American business people try to keep their business life separated from their personal life and prefer to share their evenings with their families. They will only consider accepting a dinner invitation, if a dinner meeting is important for the success of a valued business relationship. Therefore, you should not be surprised if they politely decline an invitation.

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