



Japanese Business Protocol

by Motozo Yamamori

Japan as a country is incomprehensible in many ways for a Canadian, especially for a businessman about to do business there. He finds this out as soon as he steps off the aircraft at Narita Airport.

ARRIVING IN JAPAN

At the airport, he will see many Japanese waiting to greet people returning from abroad, or to welcome those who have come to visit. However, unlike in Toronto, there is little show of emotion, one rarely sees friends embracing, or husbands kissing their wives. The Japanese will express their welcome outwardly in words and facial expression only in the privacy of intimate surroundings. To refrain from a public display of emotion is not only a custom in Japan, it is a persisting part of an old cultural tradition and has also been long regarded as a virtue.

If you have come to know a Japanese person very well in Canada and were meeting him (or her) at the airport in Japan throwing your arms around his shoulders, or kissing him (or her), he will be startled. He may be embarrassed in front of other Japanese. If you are greeted by a friend, therefore, it is best to keep it to a smile and a handshake while you are in a public place.

This may lead a Canadian visitor to think of Japanese as a cold people. This is quite incorrect - it is simply that the custom of showing emotion in public is not acceptable. When compared to a Westerner, in his heart a Japanese person may have much warmer feelings toward visitors from abroad.

There is an old saying in Japan which roughly translated means: "A friend comes from afar; how pleasant it is to welcome him." This gives expression to the code of hospitality of the Japanese - that a visiting

stranger must be given a heart felt welcome regardless of the business he brings with him. True to this spirit, your host will invite you to dinner and generously entertain you immediately after your arrival. Since this is done even before a business discussion begins, it often leads to serious misunderstandings. A Westerner often interprets this expression of hospitality as a gesture welcoming his business. When later deals are not concluded as one hoped, this may lead to disappointment, anger and resentment.



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When Motozo immigrated to Canada in 1973 he established his own Trading Information and Planning Services company as a business consulting firm between Canada and Japan. In 1976 he was appointed as the Secretary-General with the Toronto Japanese Association of Commerce and Industry.

In 1982 he joined the City of Scarborough and in 1992 he joined The City of Vaughan as the Senior Business Development Consultant for the Economic Development Department. Motozo has successfully completed two international planning projects between Halifax and

Hokodate and Scarborough and Sagunihara. He is currently working on an international partnership between Saujo and Vaughan.

It must be understood that your Japanese host is entertaining you as a visitor who has taken the trouble to travel a long distance to see him. This is separate from how he may view the business propositions you are bringing. Misunderstandings of this type are particularly frequent when it involves Japanese owners of

smaller businesses who have little experience with foreign businessmen.

BUSINESS CARDS

It is customary in Japan to exchange business cards at the first meeting. It is a good idea to prepare a large number of cards when going to Japan. These cards will be the sole proof of your status and function.

There is a sort of ceremony surrounding the exchange of business cards which a visitor should be aware of. A card is "presented", therefore it should be held firmly in one hand. A card is received with the same care with the other hand, with a gesture of thanks.

A businessman's card is a very important tool for making one known to others in Japan and it should be treated with great respect. Even as an oversight one should not throw a couple of cards on the table as one leaves.

Often during business discussions someone will arrange business cards in front of him on the table. This allows one

to be aware of the names and positions of the participants during the discussion. Since foreign names are difficult to remember, it is worth giving this a try.

During business visits in Japan, one is introduced to more people than is usual in Canada. This is the direct result of a business system peculiar to Japan where

decision making in business requires the consensus of all the departments involved. As a result you will be taken around to meet the heads of different departments who will listen to your presentations. Business cards are exchanged with each introduction, so you will need a large supply of cards.

BUSINESS DISCUSSIONS

Japanese people greatly value politeness. What may be a relaxed and informal gesture to a Westerner may cause an unpleasant impression to a Japanese. This includes sitting sideways, propping one's chin with a hand and crossing legs while sitting. It is also wise to refrain from telling too many jokes during business discussions.

It is a good idea to bring much printed material about your company and products. Since Japanese often have difficulty with foreign languages they may not always be able to follow your oral presentation. At the same time some may feel reluctant to ask questions because of fear to offend you. I have known cases where insufficient understanding has kept deals from being completed.

Although often limited in oral and conversational English, the average Japanese has very good reading comprehension. This stems from the traditional educational method which stresses reading and writing but fails completely in conversational English. This is especially true for those who are middle-aged, or older and presently are in management positions.

For this reason your oral presentations should be well supported by printed material. This will ensure better understanding and greater possibilities of succeeding with your business deals. It would also be very helpful to leave a written summary of your presentation and discussion.

DECISION BY CONSENSUS

As already mentioned above, the business system in Japan requires consensus among all departments affected before a negotiation is concluded. This system is so firmly rooted that even a president of a firm would rarely make a decision alone without consultation.

This consensus among the departments is formalized through a procedure called "rengi seido", or consultative circular. According to this, first the department

which has the main responsibility for the transaction will develop a proposal outlining in detail the negotiation and the plans. Later this document is circulated among other departments whose approval will be indicated on the document by the seals of the department heads. After having received all the necessary seals of approval, then, and only then, is the proposal implemented.

It is for this reason that negotiations with Japanese businesses are said to take a long time. If one were to enter business negotiations without knowing this, one would find the experience frustrating and confusing. The advantage is, however, that once approval is given, a project is almost never cancelled, or side-tracked, and one can proceed with the assurance that a stable agreement has been made.

It is to your advantage therefore, to help your partner develop a good proposal by providing him with as much information as possible.

A business trip to Japan is an expensive proposition. You want to make it a success. Conducting business in countries with different cultures requires careful study of their customs and manners. This must be done for the sake of civility and for succeeding in business.