

Make a great first impression,
wherever you go.

International Meet & Greet

You never have a second chance to make a first impression. Research shows that lasting impressions are made within the first eight seconds of meeting someone. Those first few seconds can determine whether you *form* a new relationship or *lose* one depending on the other person's perception of you. In an international organization such as Toastmasters, cultural differences will likely be a part of many of your encounters. Let's explore the rules for verbal introductions, handshakes, eye contact, body distance and the exchange of business cards.

Introductions

Customs vary widely among countries and even among regions of the United States. Let's start with the task of introducing two people. Which person do you introduce first? In the U.S. and in most other countries, we address the most respected person first, typically the person with more authority, the one higher up in a corporation or simply the older person. If we were introducing Toastmasters Club President Jane Doe to new club member John Smith, we would speak to the president first: "Jane, I'd like to introduce you to John Smith, a new member who learned about the club through our Web site. John, Jane Doe is our club president and, like you, she is a martial artist."

The introductory sentence is followed with a few words about the person. The purpose is to provide the individuals with some details that they might have in common. Perhaps they attended the same school, lived in the same city at one time or have the same hobby.

When possible, people participating in an introduction should stand.

Handshakes

At the conclusion of the verbal introduction, the two individuals being introduced extend their hands. "Handshakes vary by culture, according to values, communication style, gender and the nature of the relationship," says Hilka Klinkenberg, founder and president of the New York City-based Global Coaching and Consulting Group, which consults and trains on cultural business issues.

To offer a proper handshake in the United States, you position the palm perpendicular to the floor with thumb open, clasp the other person's hand and hold for approximately three seconds. "Generally, we pump the hand two or three times," says Klinkenberg. "However, in France and Germany, one pump is considered appropriate."

Other countries have differing customs regarding handshakes. Some handshakes are considered inappropriate in the United States yet appropriate in other countries,

according to Klinkenberg. For example, a soft handshake, or one involving fingers only, is appropriate in some Asian countries.

People who travel around the U.S. notice regional differences between the East Coast and the West Coast. East Coasters are more formal, with a firm handshake grip, whereas West Coasters are more casual, with a lighter handshake. West Coasters often hug business associates as well, which is not considered appropriate in other parts of the world, especially between a man and woman. In a number of cultures, especially in the Middle East and Russia, handshakes between men and women are discouraged.

Face to Face

In the U.S., eye contact is important, and people who don't look others in the eyes may be considered untrustworthy. In Japan, a handshake may include a bow with eyes cast downward. "In Japan, eye contact by a subordinate could be considered a sign of aggressiveness," says Klinkenberg.

Smiling is normal when greeting someone in most Western cultures. It indicates that the individuals are happy to meet one another. However, in certain cultures, such as Germany, a business introduction is done with a "polite smile that is somewhat restrained,"



according to a representative of the German Consulate.

The suitable distance between two people talking varies by culture as well. In the U.S., most people stand 24 to 30 inches apart to maintain a comfortable distance. However, in Brazil and Russia, the distance shrinks to about 10 inches. Wherever you travel, make it a habit to note how far apart other people stand so you know what is considered an appropriate space between business people in that part of the world.

Business Cards

After introductions and handshakes, it's customary in most cultures to exchange business cards. Once again, you should pay attention because variations exist. In the

U.S., business-card exchanges have become informal, oftentimes with little attention paid to the exchange protocol or the contents on the card. But paying attention to these can, in many ways, make the exchange more efficient for both people involved. It's a good idea for a person offering his or her business card to point the card with its letters facing toward the receiver, so that person can read the card easily. The business card should be accepted with two fingers holding the card on the edge and not covering information, so it can be easily read. In Japan and China, though, a business card is usually presented and accepted with two hands.

Whether greeting a prospective club member, meeting someone at

the Toastmasters International Convention or introducing business colleagues, the first few minutes set the stage for the relationship. Learning and observing cultural customs will help you avoid making awkward mistakes. "As you travel the world, pay attention to the way individuals act, and respond accordingly," concludes Klinkenberg. 

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