

Essential Do's and Taboos

**The Complete Guide to International
Business and Leisure Travel**

Roger E. Axtell



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Essential Do's and Taboos

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For Mitzi

*There are truths on one side of Pyrenees which are
falsehoods on the other side.*

— Blaise Pascal, seventeenth-century philosopher

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Preface

*A man's feet must be planted in his country,
but his eyes should survey the world.*

—George Santayana

Early in my business career, the president of The Parker Pen Company, where I worked, decided that I should be assigned to our London offices in order to broaden my value to the firm.

As it happened, I was the first American to be sent to our English subsidiary and, understandably, my British coworkers were hesitant and uncertain about how to deal with me. They wondered, Why is he being posted there? Is he a spy? I also learned later that at the time our British colleagues suffered from an inferiority complex as a result of constantly being told how successful and how advanced American marketing methods were.

The irony of this last circumstance was that, in truth, our U.K. subsidiary had been more successful in establishing the company's brand in that marketplace than we Americans were in the United States. In the United Kingdom, the Parker brand name was so highly valued and respected that people actually aspired to own our products. There, the Parker name was equivalent to Tiffany or Rolex.

So there I was, a very junior manager, assigned to an office where people were guardedly suspicious of me and reluctantly expected to

hear over and over again how successfully we marketed our products back in the United States.

Furthermore, one of my first shocks was that British English could be quite different from American English. Even though I had been trained as a journalist in college, many of my attempts at clever communication were lost on my British colleagues. My American witticisms were met with blank stares, my grammar and pronunciation sounded faulty to them, and, according to their standards, even my spelling was incorrect.

Next, I began to realize how much we Americans tend to relish superlatives like *first, best, largest, greatest, and grandest*. Not so with the British. They are much more self-deprecating. For example, where a reasonably skilled American tennis player might establish that he had been the club champion at home, his British counterpart might casually comment, "Oh, yes. I managed to play a bit." Only later would the American learn that the Brit had competed at Wimbledon. As another example, I worked with a British colleague for twenty years before accidentally finding out that he had been awarded one of the highest medals of merit while in the army in World War II. During those twenty years, he never once mentioned that to me.

Therefore, one of my new and constant guidelines became "understatement." To deal with the local inferiority complex, I decided to counter any of their beliefs that I considered myself better or smarter than the rest of them. For example, at that time the United Kingdom was experiencing a worrisome "brain drain" among its youngest and brightest. Many of the most talented young people had left the Mother Isle to emigrate elsewhere. So, I often mentioned that my coming to England must have represented a "drained brain," meaning that I considered myself something of an empty-headed type and I had been sent there to soak up all the local knowledge. I also readily agreed to take on any task assigned to me, no matter how trivial, messy, or lowly it might be.

Months passed and I soon received more responsibility, along with less suspicion and more acceptance. Meanwhile, I gained a whole new education. As one example, an early assignment in 1964 was to phone our distributors in Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Brussels, and Rome to advise them of a certain procedural change. In those

days, I was so nervous at the prospect of actually phoning these major international capitals that I wrote down every word I was instructed to say, rehearsed them, and then quickly delivered my speech in order to save on long distance expenses. Later, I learned that phone calls to those locales from London were similar, back in the United States, to my calling St. Louis, Denver, Los Angeles, and Seattle.

I also learned to be cautious with my vocabulary, and I studied the intricacies of British English, especially in areas where pitfalls awaited me. For instance, in England a *scheme* is simply a “plan,” whereas in the United States, we consider a *scheme* to be something slightly devious.

On another occasion I commented to a British colleague that I considered him “very sharp,” but then I detected a change in his demeanor. It turned out he was highly offended because in British English, *sharp* implies being “crafty and unprincipled,” whereas in America we define it as “bright and alert.”

One year passed. Then two. Then three. And, finally, four years had elapsed. During that time, my duties were expanded to cover other regions outside the United Kingdom. I found myself traveling throughout Western Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. For me, it was an incomparable apprenticeship, like on-the-job training and graduate school all wrapped into one.

During this time, I also adopted the practice of keeping small notebooks in my suit coat pocket to record things I learned, such as important dates, various holidays, the rules of toasting, the full names and birthdays of clients and colleagues, tricky word differences, tips on protocol, dining habits, gestures and body language, the role of women in business, and so on.

When my superiors in the United States finally decided it was time for me to return and become the head of the home office’s international marketing department, I departed England with many regrets.

Several months later, I learned that the head of the British subsidiary had written to the U.S. president of the company headquarters to give the following short evaluation of my tour of duty in England. “You sent us a nice American boy. We are now returning to you a proper English gentleman.”

For me, there was no finer tribute . . . then or since. I had learned the supreme importance of showing respect for other cultures and, most important, how to adapt and gain acceptance.

I later coined the phrase *chameleon management*, meaning that the wise international manager learns to go from culture to culture adopting some of the local coloration, some of the local values, and some of the local behavior. I don't mean to suggest that we should lose our own nationalism, but we should simply show respect for the way others live.

That's what this book is all about: acquiring respect for and awareness of behavior and protocol in other cultures, no matter how much they differ from our own.

It's what Blaise Pascal warned about centuries ago—we need to realize that “there are truths on one side of the Pyrenees which are falsehoods on the other.” He was referring, of course, to the Pyrenees mountain region that separates Spain from France, but, more important, to a third culture—the Basques—that resided in between. Thus, among the three regions, there were many inconsistencies in behavior, beliefs, and lifestyles.

Acknowledgments

Arch Ward, the late popular sportswriter for the *Chicago Tribune*, regularly ended his daily column, “In the Wake of the News,” with these simple words: “The Wake depends upon its friends.”

I’m sure that expression would be echoed by almost every writer, because we all rely on a myriad of sources for assistance and inspiration. Here are the names of just some of those invaluable friends who helped me in the compilation of this book.

Alex Durtka is considered by many to be the “hostmeister” of the city of Milwaukee and its environs. He is the longtime president and CEO of the International Institute of Milwaukee and the executive vice president of the Friends of the International Institute of Wisconsin, and he serves on the boards of a host of other internationally related organizations in that state. Furthermore, Milwaukee is truly a multiethnic city. In fact, the entire state of Wisconsin is historically unique because from 1840 to 1890, no less than thirty-four different ethnic groups immigrated there, mainly from Europe, and many of those enclaves can still be identified. Old World Wisconsin is the largest outdoor museum in the United States dedicated to Wisconsin’s multiple ethnicity. Alex’s organization annually receives hundreds of guests, especially government and other political figures, from overseas. Alex is indeed an expert on how to host international visitors, and he aided me greatly by vetting chapter 3, “Essential Tips for Hosting International Visitors.”

Mary Regel is the director of International Development within the Wisconsin Department of Commerce. She has been a valued friend for more than twenty years and has assisted me in all my writing. Mary also leads a talented group of trade directors scattered around the world. Five of them were gracious enough to vet segments in chapter 8 of this book:

Vincent Lencioni is the director of the LGA Consulting/Wisconsin Trade Office in Mexico. Vince kindly read my segment on Mexico and provided some valuable corrections and additions for a country that hosts more and more Americans each year. *Salud y gracias*, Vince.

Kara H. Smith is the director of the State of Wisconsin Department of Commerce European Trade Office. Kara took the time and patience to proofread and amend the segments on Germany, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom. These are indeed diverse but highly important regions for any American visitor, and I thank Kara for her vast knowledge and support.

Paul Swenson is the director of the Council of Great Lakes Governors Trade Office, located in Shanghai. With China predicted to perhaps equal the economic power of the United States by the year 2020, learning about that remarkable country is essential for anyone traveling overseas on business or pleasure. Thank you, Paul, for reviewing and improving my words and advice on China.

Nancy Ward is the director of the Wisconsin representation in Canada. One of the two closest neighbors to the United States, with one of the longest international borders in the world, it is essential for all U.S. citizens to understand and respect the wonderful people of Canada. Nancy added some helpful insights to the segment on Canada. My thanks to you, Nancy.

Takahiro Haggisako is the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) business adviser to the state of Wisconsin, stationed in Madison. JETRO is Japan's official agency for assisting

American companies to do business in that important trade destination. Takahiro kindly reviewed my section on Japan, for which I thank him most sincerely.

Paul D. Churchill is another friend of more than twenty years who heads the important Export Assistance Center in Wisconsin for the U.S. Department of Commerce. His office counsels all types of Wisconsin businesses, whether it be on a one-to-one basis or before an audience of hundreds. He represents the single most important channel for help from the U.S. government. His patience and wide knowledge were invaluable to me for chapter 9, "Essential Things to Know about Taking Your Show on the Road."

Dan McGinnity is vice president of communications for the Noel Group, one of the country's largest providers of all forms of travel assistance, both domestically and internationally. Dan supplied the details and advice on travel insurance for chapter 7, "Essential Things to Know When Preparing for Travel Abroad." The Noel Group provides, shall we say, "a parachute" full of aids for anyone planning to travel abroad. More information can be found at www.noelgroup.com.

Crista Larson is a graduate student in the Business School of the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee. Over a period of six months, Crista searched the Net for background information and facts about the Internet for chapter 6, "Essential Things to Know about Using the Internet Internationally." It was a specialized task, and she accomplished it beautifully. Many thanks, Crista, and good luck on your business career.

Ed Meachen, Ph.D., is the associate vice president for Learning and Information Technology for the University of Wisconsin System. That system consists of 160,000 students enrolled on twenty-six campuses across Wisconsin. In 1990, Ed helped to create and lead the Academic Advanced Distributed Learning Co-Lab. It is now one of the nation's premier labs for "next-generation learning," utilizing new technologies in Wisconsin. I turned to Ed to help me with chapter 6, "Essential Things to Know about Using the Internet Internationally."

Patty O'Brien is a computer whiz who not only can help those of us belonging to an earlier generation as we navigate around hard drives but can do it with grace and patience. It will, of course, be

difficult for any reader of this book to discern how much Patty helped me to accomplish its writing, but I am aware of her hard work and greatly appreciate it.

Tom Miller, the executive editor at John Wiley & Sons, had the courage to entrust me with writing the last five of my books. His suggestions for improvement were always irritatingly correct, but, of course, that's his job. And since I am now in the three-score-and-fifteen mark of my life, it is unlikely there will be another opportunity for collaboration. But, as I wrote in the chapter on the future of the Internet, only time will tell. I want to thank Tom most sincerely.

I owe special and genuine thanks to Sally Wecksler, who served as my literary agent starting in 1986. She successfully negotiated contracts for nine of my books (including this one) with John Wiley & Sons until her death in January 2005. Sally was also a specialist in foreign-translation versions for many of her clients and succeeded in selling foreign-language versions of my books as follows: eleven foreign-language versions for *Gestures: Do's & Taboos of Body Language Around the World*; six foreign-language versions of *Do's & Taboos Around the World*; three foreign-language editions of *Do's & Taboos of Public Speaking*; plus foreign-language versions of *Do's & Taboos of Hosting International Visitors* and *Do's & Taboos of Using English Around the World*. She was kind, gracious, thorough, and—it should be obvious—a talented businesswoman. How can I eulogize her? To meet that challenge, I happened upon a story involving Joyce Hall, the founder of the Hallmark Company. In his lifetime, Mr. Hall must have read hundreds of thousands of sentimental expressions for every occasion. When asked "Do you have one favorite sentiment that stands out?" he replied, "Yes." And I have chosen that single expression to thank Sally. It is simply this: "I wish I could be the friend you've been to me."

To all of these fine people, I offer my thanks for their contributions.

Essential Do's and Taboos

Introduction

This book is a compendium of helpful things to know about international business, protocol, etiquette, customs, behavior, gestures and body language, and other related topics.

In addition, it contains separate chapters on (1) how to expand your business into overseas markets, (2) how women can carve out careers in international business, (3) how to prepare for a trip overseas, (4) how to host international visitors, (5) what the Internet and e-commerce mean in international business, and (6) some essentials to know about eleven popular international destinations: Canada, Mexico, Japan, China, Germany, France, Italy, Brazil, Russia, India, and the United Kingdom.

It is a potpourri of information on how to successfully travel overseas, whether you are a tourist, a student, or a businessperson.

The word *essential* appears not only in the title of this book but often in the chapter headings and throughout the text. Synonyms for *essential* are words such as *basic*, *necessary*, and *fundamental*.

Another synonym could be *indispensable*, but I shy away from that rather lofty and egotistical term because this book does not deal in such absolutes. Cultural differences are a complex and fickle business. A certain cultural practice that might be common in one part of a country may not necessarily occur in another area of that same country. Codifying rules for behavior is never easy because behavior is a moving target.

Therefore, consider my use of the word *essential* in this book to mean “very useful,” “helpful,” and “important,” but not “ironclad” or “absolute.”

Why Might This Book Be Timely and Helpful?

A number of years ago, *Scientific American* proclaimed that “the future is international.” The *New York Times* writer and author Thomas L. Friedman has written extensively on the tectonic movement toward “globalization.” One of his first books on globalization was the popular *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, subtitled *Understanding Globalization*. He claimed that the age of globalization began the year the Berlin Wall was taken down, which signaled the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the globalization period.

The August 1999 issue of *National Geographic* magazine’s cover declared that we are in the midst of a “Global Culture,” that is “linked by jets, e-mail, cell phones, and films, [and] we are all in each other’s backyard.” In August 2005, Clyde Prestowitz, a former economic adviser in the Reagan administration and currently the founder and president of the Economic Strategic Institute, a Washington think tank that’s influential in international areas, stated on public television that “the Internet and FedEx have brought us in touch globally faster than ever before. In just two seconds, the Internet can connect each of us with every corner of the world . . . and FedEx can deliver a package or parcel almost anywhere within thirty-six hours.”

This obliges us to learn more about the world around us. It has been described by some people as “lifeboat earth” or “spaceship earth,” and we are all passengers who must try to exist peaceably together.

How This Book Is Organized

The contents and the chapters are arranged so that it’s not necessary to read them in consecutive order. You can choose the topics that interest you most. Then perhaps at a later time, you can examine the other chapters for your general edification. Each chapter concludes with a summary of important things to remember.

Chapter 1 deals with—for me, at least—one of the most intriguing aspects of communicating with other people around the world: gestures and body language. As you will discover, we all owe a great debt to the English anthropologist Desmond Morris, who is indisputably the most knowledgeable expert on that subject. As I tell audiences wherever I speak, “You are going to learn how to make rude gestures in more than a dozen different countries . . . without realizing you are being rude.”

Chapter 2 concerns protocol. Awareness of international protocol is rapidly becoming an essential skill throughout the business world. Note the following quote from a comprehensive reference manual published by the Convention Industry Council (CIC). This is a federation of leading national and international organizations comprised of 100,000 individuals and 15,000 firms involved in the staging of meetings, conventions, and exhibitions around the world. In 2005, the CIC published its manual to “take the mystique out of international event planning and provide a work of reference that event professionals everywhere will find helpful.” According to the CIC, “Protocol is commonly described as a set of international courtesy rules. These well-established and time-honoured [sic] rules based on principles of civility have made it possible for people to live and work together for centuries.” Chapter 2 will equip you with a basic guide on the various attitudes and practices around the world concerning punctuality, titles, gift giving, toasting, social dining, social drinking, and conversational taboos.

Chapter 3 unveils the often-underestimated social grace of hosting international visitors. Let’s be honest—hosting is done in different ways around the world, so it is important to know how we in the United States host guests, compared to what we might encounter when traveling abroad. Learning the various styles of hosting can be an enlightening discovery whenever we venture outside the United States. For example, we find that some American staples—apple pie, corn on the cob, cooked turkey, and other foods—may be considered weird by our international visitors. Another oddity: why do many American office buildings and hotels not have a thirteenth floor? (You can probably answer that quickly, but a foreign visitor might find it unusual.) Speaking of floor designations, in some countries

what we call the “first floor” of a building is often referred to as the “ground floor.” Simple enough, until you then discover that their first floor is what we term the *second floor*. Read this chapter for more differences in the seemingly simple task of hosting international visitors.

Chapter 4 deals with what you are reading at this moment—the English language or, more appropriately, the American-English language. We are extremely fortunate that our mother tongue is one of the most widely spoken, if not the dominant, language in the world. Yet there is a paradox. It is also one of the most difficult languages to learn. It is filled with complex grammar, pronunciations, and spelling. Pity the people around the world who have had to learn English as a second language. We speakers of American English must show great patience, respect, and understanding to avoid miscommunication, which can be one of the most damaging and costly aspects of traveling or doing business outside the United States.

Chapter 5 might be considered the “for women only” segment of this book since it speaks entirely to female readers who want to travel abroad comfortably and successfully. For example, what is the greatest fear American women harbor when traveling outside the United States? You’ll find the answer in this chapter, as well as a host of suggestions for doing business in male-dominated cultures such as Japan and the Middle East. This chapter is based on interviews with more than a hundred successful businesswomen who offered insights to me and the three women coauthors of *Do's & Taboos around the World for Women in Business*. (I became so immersed in this book that on the speaking circuit, I occasionally made a Freudian slip and said, “I wrote this book with three *other* women.”)

Chapter 6 presents a brand-new way to achieve success in international business: the Internet. This chapter addresses the questions “How will the Internet affect the international marketing manager? Will he or she merely sit in front of a computer screen conducting business electronically instead of boarding long transatlantic flights to distant lands?” The Internet will certainly bring a sea-change of improvements in the way we conduct daily communications using our cell phones, hand-held PDAs, video-conferencing, and the like. But wait—an opposing argument says that when it comes to international

business, there is no substitute for face-to-face communications and eyeball-to-eyeball understanding.

Chapter 7 will help the tyro—the beginner—to international travel by suggesting ways you can prepare for your trip abroad. It explains the new options for travel agents, plus gives some basic tips for making your overseas voyages more effective and enjoyable.

Chapter 8 zeroes in on eleven of the most popular destinations—Canada, Japan, China, Mexico, England, France, Italy, Brazil, Russia, India, and Germany—and equips you with dozens of tips and bits of background information to help you prepare for your visits.

Chapter 9 is designed for anyone who is doing, or wishes to conduct, business overseas. It begins by outlining basic attitudinal differences toward conducting business in other countries. It then lays out why exporting is easy and profitable and provides a three-step process for entering into business with new customers around the globe. An abundance of low-cost assistance—even free assistance—is available from experts at the federal level and within your particular state.

Finally, an epilogue includes the story behind my nine-book “Do’s & Taboos” series, plus what I hope will be some amusing stories about my publicity tours, when I appeared on national and international TV shows and did a classic book tour. Accounts of other events that occurred over the last twenty years are also provided.

1

Essential Things to Know about Gestures and Body Language

Sixty percent of our daily communication is nonverbal.

—Edward T. Hall

Are simple hand gestures and body movements important?
Here are some answers:

It's inaugural day in the United States, 2005. President George W. Bush is in the reviewing stand on Washington, D.C.'s Pennsylvania Avenue as the University of Texas marching band passes by. He raises his hand to salute his alma mater with the time-honored "hook 'em horns" sign—fist raised upright, index finger and pinkie sticking up, the sign of the horns of a Texas longhorn steer, the mascot and symbol of the University of Texas. Bush's picture appears on TV screens around the globe . . . and many people in countries around the world are immediately insulted!



That very same gesture—fist upraised, index and little fingers extended upward—is considered rude in certain other countries.

- In Italy, it means “Your wife is cheating on you!” “You are being cuckolded.”
- In some parts of Africa, you are issuing a curse.
- In Norway, the Internet newspaper *Nettavisen* expressed outrage that not only Bush, but his wife and two daughters, would issue such an insult.
- Yet the gesture can also have positive meanings. In the Mediterranean Sea, fishing boats may have this symbol painted on their bows to ward off evil, and in Brazil, women often wear gold or silver locket with this sign as a good luck amulet.
- In the United States, the “hook ‘em horns” sign has varied meanings. A baseball player uses it as a signal for “two outs,” and in American football, a referee flashes this sign to indicate a “second down.” Finally, on the streets of Los Angeles, it is a gangland symbol representing the horns of the devil!

As for poor George Bush, the newly installed president of the United States, he was simply paying tribute to his alma mater, the University of Texas. There are more details on the “hook ‘em horns” gesture later in this chapter.

Here are two more examples of how an innocent gesture can become a faux pas: take, for instance, the sole of your shoe.

It’s March 2003 in Iraq, and coalition troops are invading Baghdad. People are glued to television sets around the world as U.S. soldiers climb a huge statue of Saddam Hussein and tie a rope to its head. Armored tanks then pull the statue down. Crowds of Iraqis rush forward and *pound the fallen statue with their shoes*! Why? In the Middle East and Southeast Asia, the bottom of the shoe is considered the lowest, dirtiest part of the body; therefore, the crowds were insulting Saddam’s likeness with the strongest gesture possible.