

Harmony Across the Pacific

Coping with language barriers is just one of the “tricks” of global trade.

I was initially excited about the prospect of doing business in Asia. My first trip there, seven years ago, was a real eye-opener to the unlimited possibilities of world economics. But to this day, even with an office and staff in Taiwan that makes this world seem smaller, I am still a student in the cross-cultural relationship. As Woody Allen once said, “I’m astounded by people who want to know the universe when it’s hard enough to find your way around Chinatown.”

As Western interest in doing business in Asia continues to grow, the cultural differences between the two societies have become more apparent – and more important. Asian culture has its unique traditions and rules of social etiquette, and Western businesses must be sensitive to these cultural challenges.

Successfully doing business in Asia requires proactive and frequent communication. While emotion and humor may be normal parts of a Western business relationship, they are considered inappropriate for doing business in Asia. As Mia Doucet, author of *China in Motion* (chinainmotion.com), explains, “Asians do not use humor to lighten things up at work. It causes insult and can result in loss of face. Business is no laughing matter.”

Harmony is a cherished value in this culture, and it goes hand-in-hand with the concept of “saving face,” which is akin to preserving dignity and self-respect. Harmony greases the societal wheels and allows two or more parties to come together with minimal friction. For harmonious business relationships, avoid asking questions that require a “Yes” or “No” answer. In Asian countries, “Yes” means “Yes, I hear you,” not “Yes, I agree.” Traditional Asian culture believes that saying “No” creates disharmony and loss of prestige. Demanding a “Yes” or “No” answer will not generate any useful information, and may create unnecessary tension.

And tension is what I created while visiting a potential Taiwanese vendor. I asked if a certain manufacturing process was used in building PCBs at the vendor’s facility. My Taiwan operations manager kicked me under the table and muttered, “You can’t ask that.” She proceeded to ask the question, in Chinese, in what is considered a more acceptable way. After 20 minutes of

additional conversation in Chinese, she turned to me and said, in English, “Yes.”

“Face” is an essential component of the Asian mind, and the Asian people in general are very sensitive to gaining and maintaining face in all aspects of social and business life. It is a prized commodity, one that can be given, earned, lost or taken away. Causing someone to lose face could ruin business prospects or even invite recrimination. And face goes both ways, according to Doucet. “When there is a risk of losing face (yours or theirs), the Chinese will often pretend to understand your meaning, when in fact, they do not fully understand. This happens surprisingly often, due to the language barrier. When one Chinese business person has a better grasp of English than others in a conversation and is serving as a translator, for example, he or she may be reluctant to admit if your question is unclear. Doing so would mean a loss of face. And, by an interesting cultural twist, your lack of clarity may cause *you* to lose face, as well.”

Western slang should also be avoided; it often does not translate well. Several years ago, we received an email from a vendor notifying us of a shipment delay due to problems with a particular part number. Our reply stated that we understood it was a tricky part number to build, and that we understood the delay. “Tricky” was the wrong word to use; we had managed to insult the vendor, implying he was making a phony excuse for lack of performance. It took three emails and two phone calls, with many apologies, to restore harmony.

Maintaining a good business relationship with our Asian partners is sometimes like maintaining a healthy marriage – it takes lots of work and is not meant to be a part-time job. It is a full-time job that requires a great deal of effort and constant communication. You must pick your Asian partners with care and work to foster a mutually successful, and harmonious, relationship. An experienced broker/distributor who understands Asian cultural nuances can handle this crucial business commitment for you, getting you from the initial “I do” to an ongoing and profitable “marriage” that will benefit both your company and your overseas colleagues. ■

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