

# Business etiquette, language & culture

Whilst Germany is one of the most attractive markets for UK business, many fall into the trap of thinking that it is easy to do business there. This is predominantly due to it being geographically close, and that much international business communication takes place in English. However, many forget that the German culture is quite different from that of the UK and this is reflected in many aspects of business dealings and communication.

Germans have a clear divide between work and social life. Working hours are very precise, and taking lunch breaks, not working at weekends nor on National and local holidays is taken very seriously. Never drop-in on contacts without planning and agreeing with them two or three weeks beforehand.

## Language

Whilst the official language is German, English is the best known foreign language, and is generally used for international business. It is also not unusual for educated Germans to have a good command of at least one other foreign language, the most common being French, Italian, Spanish, and Russian particularly in the eastern Länder.

Do not assume those Germans who can speak English necessarily do so fluently. When speaking English, try not to be colloquial (i.e. do not use phrases common in English which may have no meaning in German); try not to speak in a broad dialect; focus on good language with short, clear, simple and concise statements (rather than questions) with less emotion – Germans are more direct and formal, and do not use idioms or small talk in business.

If you are selling into Germany, it is incredibly important to use German for all your communication materials, which will need to be of a very high quality. Do not use internet translation sites, which are not always accurate. Consider what type of future relationship you want to have in Germany, and how much German you will need. UKTI at the British Consulate in Düsseldorf can provide a list of translators if required.

As a common courtesy, as a UK business wishing to succeed in Germany you will find that understanding and speaking a little German – although possibly not essential – does indicate that you are serious about doing business there, and shows that you are keen to understand and appreciate their local culture.

## Emails

Be careful with emails. If in English, follow the guidance above, keeping short and to-the-point. Use bullets (each with no more than 15-20 words maximum); use good, simple, concise and direct language. If in German, never rely on internet translation sites – always use a German or official translator.

## Greeting

Handshakes are the usual method of greeting when doing business in Germany, shaking hands in-turn with everyone – men and women – if several people are present. When shaking hands do not keep your other hand in your pocket as this appears too casual, and use eye contact. When women enter a room it is considered polite for men to stand. Men should be addressed using Herr (Mr), and women as Frau (Mrs/Ms) followed by their surname (only family members and friends use first names). Use professional titles e.g. for doctors etc. where known. If speaking a little German, always use the formal “Sie” version for “You” in business, not the informal “Du”.

When doing business in Germany, remember that punctuality is a serious issue. It is considered bad etiquette to be late or early as this shows disrespect for peoples' time.

## Doing business – meetings

Germans are very methodical and plan carefully. You should therefore always book meetings or lengthy telephone conversations at least two-to-three weeks in advance. Meetings typically take place between 11am and 1pm and between 3 and 5pm. Avoid Friday afternoons, the holiday months of July, August and December plus any regional festivals. When entering a room the most senior should enter first, greeting each other before others are present. Then wait to be told where to sit, treating the whole process with great formality.

Meetings are very formal, usually with a set agenda, start and finish times. The Germans will agree meeting protocol and stick to the agenda. They are very methodical, more-focused on tasks rather than relationships, and will analyse proposals thoroughly. They are particularly keen on attention to detail, careful planning, consultation and consensus, considering concrete facts rather than novel sales techniques.

The four most important points to remember before a meeting are:

- punctuality (always be on time, never late)
- planning (agree agendas, objectives, timings etc. beforehand)
- professionalism (emphasise your qualifications, experience etc.)

- preparation (consider carefully beforehand, and carry-out thorough desk research)

## Dining

Credit cards are not always as widely used as in the UK, so be prepared to pay by cash, particularly outside some of the larger cities. If you are invited to a business meal, then the host will pay – do not offer to help with the cost as this will seem rude. Similarly if you invite someone to a meal, you will be expected to pay. Sometimes if a large number eat socially, it is not unusual to be asked “Zusammen oder getrammt?” (“all-together or separate?”) – if the latter, then separate bills will be brought.

Although service and VAT are included in the menu price in Germany, it is normal to round this up by e.g. 5-10% to a round figure. Do not leave tips on the table. If you wish to leave a tip you have to tell the full amount before you pay.

Be aware that although Germans do drink a lot of beer (and wine), this is more to savour the taste rather than to drink to excess. Drunkenness is still socially unacceptable, particularly in rural areas.

Public holidays 2016Date:Holiday:State:

### **1 January**

New Year's Day

National

### **6 January**

Epiphany

Baden-Württemberg,

Bavaria,

Saxony-Anhalt

### **25 March**

Good Friday

National

### **28 March**

Easter Monday

National

**1 May**

Labour Day

National

**5 May**

Ascension Day

National

**16 May**

Whit Monday

National

**26 May**

Corpus Christi Day

Baden-Württemberg,

Bavaria, Hesse,

North Rhine-Westphalia,

Rhineland-Palatinate,

Saarland

**15 August**

Assumption Day

Bavaria, Saarland

**3 October**

Day of German Unity

National

**31 October**

Reformation Day

Brandenburg,

Mecklenburg-Pomerania,

Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt,

Thuringia

**1 November**

All Saints Day

Baden-Württemberg,

Bavaria,

North Rhine-Westphalia,

Rhineland-Palatinate,

Saarland

**16 November**

Repentance Day

Saxony

**25 December**

Christmas Day

National

**26 December**

2nd Christmas Day

National

There are many regional and local festivals and events in addition to the above, e.g. Fasching (Carnival) before Lent. These can vary between different states (Länder), during some of which, local businesses may be closed. You should carry out desk research about the local Land beforehand to check.

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