Globalization has completely changed the way we all do business. Working cross-culturally has become a crucially important element of our everyday professional lives and it is both exciting and rewarding.

Navigating the complicated currents of international business, however, can also be challenging. Without the proper preparation and training, missteps are easily made. These can range from the ridiculous to the downright damaging.

In one cross-cultural business misfire, Mountain Bell Company attempted to promote its telephone services to the Saudi market. In their ad, an executive was shown talking on the phone with his feet propped up on his desk, showing the soles of his shoes. Big misstep—displaying the bottom of one's shoes is considered deeply insulting in the Arab world. The company’s ad was a complete bust.

In another example of poorly considered marketing, a United States-based phone company targeted Latinos with a commercial, where a Latino wife orders her husband to call a friend to explain they would be late for dinner. The commercial bombed. In the Latino culture, women do not boss their husbands around, and tardiness does not usually warrant a phone call.

Another “south of the border” slip-up came when a firm printed the “OK” hand sign on each page of its catalogue. Not a good idea. In many parts of Latin America, that is considered an obscene gesture. They had to reprint all the catalogues.

Finally, an unforesen cultural blunder in Japan: A golf ball manufacturing company packaged golf balls in four-packs. So…? Well, unfortunately, items packaged in fours are unpopular in Japan since the pronunciation of the word “four” in Japanese sounds like the word “death.”

Cross-cultural faux pas are, of course, not just confined to the world of marketing and advertising. They carry over to our daily professional lives whenever we conduct business in the global community.

ResortCom is an example of a company that thrives on international business. We instill in all of our staff the importance of communicating effectively so our business conversations are not “lost in translation.” Although well intentioned, it can be easy to say the wrong thing or say it in the wrong way. Delivery and body language also play into our cross-cultural communication and should be taken into account.

While there is no quick and easy way to learn about a given culture in any depth, there are some general principles that will lead to success in communicating and conducting business with people of different cultural backgrounds. It requires people to step out of their familiar territory and sometimes their comfort zone. There is an element of uncertainty and novelty to the process, which people obviously have different appetites for, but ultimately the experience will be rewarding for all parties involved.

According to Dr. A.J. Schuler, a doctor of psychology specializing in cross-cultural communication, “Direct experience is the best way to begin to learn any new culture.”

We like to take it one step further. Since we are in the customer experience business, we address the challenge by hiring diverse international personnel. Our service teams can provide total “People Solutions” in loan and maintenance fee collections, reservations, and on-site management. To become a seamless part of our client’s team, we hire individuals who understand the cultural differences and the language and then train them on products, the developers, and the member demographics.

We feel that communication is the key to our success in this area. Having information readily available to our clients is of utmost importance. Web site content and social media networks are the latest tools for direct communication with our clients and their members. We use CRM systems to further manage our communication both internally and externally with our clients. The CRM system provides a foundation that allows us to manage content that is resort-specific, such as rules and regulations. It also allows us to manage response times.

Ultimately, direct, consistent, and clear communication is necessary no matter what the tool, method, or culture may be.
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Outside of the realm of technology, the cross-cultural business world frequently involves meeting with one’s clients face to face. Here more than anywhere, clear communication, mutual understanding, and cultural sensitivity are essential.

For instance, we have clients in the United States, Mexico, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. In meeting with these clients one on one, our executives have observed, studied, and learned how to interact smoothly and comfortably to avoid any embarrassing cultural missteps. As we saw from the examples cited earlier, slip-ups in business etiquette can cause deals to go south, messages to go unanswered, and relationships to disintegrate.

In Mexico, which accounts for more than 50 percent of our business, the flow of day-to-day business is somewhat different from our own. By observing a few simple guidelines, these differences can be easily navigated. For instance, even though you’ve made an appointment, always reconfirm the meeting again once you arrive in Mexico, and make sure that the secretary of the person you will be meeting knows how to get in touch with you. As a courtesy, all written materials should be in both English and Spanish. Agendas are not as common as they are here in the States. If you have one, it may not be followed.

In Asia, the rhythm of business is quite different. You should arrive at meetings on time or slightly early. Arriving late is considered an insult and could be a major stumbling block in relationship-building. The Chinese view on agendas is substantially different from our Mexican neighbors. Send an agenda before the meeting, so your Chinese colleagues have the chance to meet with any technical experts prior to the meeting. Discuss the agenda with your translator/intermediary prior to submission. Meetings require patience.

In a scenario not unlike a Congressional filibuster, each participant may take an opportunity to dominate the floor for lengthy periods without appearing to contribute very much of value to the meeting. Mobile phones ring frequently, and conversations tend to be boisterous. Never ask your Chinese associates to turn off their mobile phones as this causes you both to lose face. It is imperative that you bring your own interpreter, especially if you plan to discuss legal or extremely technical concepts, and be sure to brief the interpreter prior to the meeting. Visual aids are useful in large meetings and should only be done with black type on white background. Colors have special meanings and if you are not careful, your color choice could work against you.

There are numerous Web sites, books, and articles that address specific cross-cultural etiquette in more detail than I have here. However, after more than a decade working in different capacities in the global business world, I’ve become more aware of the similarities between people than the differences.

The future definitely holds possibilities in new markets for timeshare, new products, and direct marketing, especially as new technology is “shrinking the world.” To reach out and communicate clearly and openly with new clients and customers, have a clear understanding of cultural differences, similarities, and shared goals.