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## Visiting Japan on business

*There have been many books written about the Do's and Don'ts of Japanese culture. For visiting business people, the mystique surrounding Japan can add an extra level of stress to the normal pressures of work and your jet-lagged attempts to deal with an unfamiliar environment. In this short guide, we aim to dispel some of the myths and deliver a few tips to help ensure your business trip goes smoothly.*

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Rule number 1 is: Relax! Forget about the horror stories you have heard about people committing massive *faux pas* on their first dealings with the Japanese. You will find Japanese people unfailingly kind and hospitable, and they will do everything possible to try and put you at ease. As a foreigner, you are not expected to understand the subtleties of etiquette and protocol which apply to native Japanese, and they will forgive your minor social shortcomings with good humour and grace.

The other side of this coin is, of course, that as a foreigner you are *expected* to be clumsy and socially inept. Therefore, armed with a smattering of Japanese and an awareness of the basics of business etiquette, you will surprise

and delight your hosts – and in turn, help to put them at ease in your presence. Remember that for most Japanese, dealing with foreigners is a very stressful experience. Japan is an extremely homogenous society compared to most Western societies, and so few Japanese have a chance to become comfortable with aspects of Western culture which differ greatly from their own.

At its most fundamental level, the difference is that Japanese (and most East Asian) cultures are based on the idea of collectivism rather than the Western model of individualism. Just keeping that thought uppermost in your mind at all times will help ensure that you will deal comfortably with virtually any situation. Let's explore that idea a little further.

The first experience of Japan can be an assault on the senses - but in a good way! It can all seem very strange at first but once you understand a few ground rules, it doesn't take long to find your feet.



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In a business context, Western sales techniques focus on winning over a few key decision makers with logical arguments. In Japan, decisions are not made by individuals but by achieving layers of consensus within an organisation. Therefore, there is a hugely social aspect to business in Japan. Being seen as being affable, trustworthy and warmly disposed to colleagues and customers is therefore crucial to success. Relationships like these take time to build, and so deals take time to mature. Trying to push your point of view, or rush someone into a decision – as often happens in Western business – is counterproductive.

Most people have heard the famous Japanese proverb “The nail that sticks up will be hammered down.” Again, this refers to the importance the Japanese place on group harmony. A group

the famously complex Japanese rules of etiquette are, in essence, no more mysterious than just maintaining basic courtesy and good manners.

Of course, you won't be "hammered down" if you make a mistake. Remember you are not expected to understand the rules. However it will count as a big plus in your favour if you are clearly making an effort to fit in.

In a business situation, try to avoid inflexibility and attempting to force your point. The need to maintain cordial relations with others means that “blowing your own trumpet” comes across as rather vulgar and immature.

Aggressively trying to push your position comes across as disrespectful, which naturally makes further negotiations

## Collective, not individual; consensus, not conflict

doesn't just refer to a social or work group, but *any* group of people. The rules of harmony apply, for example, when travelling on a crowded train. The Japanese have a concept called *omoiyari*, which can be roughly translated as “consideration/respect for others.” So in the context of a train carriage, this means not speaking loudly or acting boisterously, not using your mobile phone or eating. In other words,

rather difficult. Just remember – collective, not individual; consensus, not conflict.

So if all that seems a lot to take in, don't worry. It's not difficult. Here's a few more little tips that will help make your trip both productive and enjoyable.

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## Do...

- Show respect for others. Listen to, and consider the words spoken carefully. Try to find consensus wherever possible
- Show interest in Japan, its culture and people
- Be punctual, self-effacing, humble, calm and good-humoured.
- Try to learn at least a few words of Japanese - it will be appreciated
- Make sure you have plenty of business cards and learn the correct technique for exchanging them (SEE BELOW)
- Follow what everyone else is doing: When in doubt, look around and copy!



## Don't...

- Appear big-headed, boastful, forceful or arrogant
- Mistreat business cards presented to you (SEE BELOW)
- Be even slightly critical of Japan – it will not be received as constructive criticism!
- Get involved in any discussion about politics or history
- Become frustrated: Japan can seem infuriating to Westerners trying to progress business projects. Try not to become impatient.

## The Way of the Business Card

*Here's how to become a ninja of business card etiquette*

When exchanging cards, grasp your own in both hands with the writing facing towards the recipient. Bow from the waist (around 15 degrees) whilst proffering your card. If you want to really impress, you can say "Douzo yoroshiku onegai shimasu".

Receive the other's card in the same manner, with a respectful bow. Take time to read it carefully and treat it with as much respect as you would the person. Don't stuff it in your pocket and definitely don't scribble notes on it! If in a meeting, place the card on the table in front of you. At other times, place it carefully in your business card holder.

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