

Client Communication in a Global World

By Janet H. Moore, J.D.

CLIENT CONTACT IN A GLOBAL WORLD calls for cultural sensitivity. As globalization grows, American lawyers increasingly have foreign clients. Lawyers should communicate with these foreign clients in a way that enhances—not detracts from—the attorney-client relationship.

Communication Style

Messages often get “lost in translation”—both literally and figuratively—during inter-cultural communication. Culturally aware lawyers have better luck at sending their messages across the cultural divide and having these messages understood by their clients as intended. These lawyers take into account each client’s particular cultural perspective and tailor their communication accordingly.

Cultural differences in communication style abound. They show up as differences in length of eye contact, vocal loudness and pitch, directness, physical proximity when conversing, and other ways. For example, many American lawyers use direct, plain language and maintain sustained eye contact when conversing; this direct communication style may work well with other Americans, but can seem too aggressive to some foreign clients. Americans speak loudly compared with many Asians, but not as loudly as many Russians.

Gestures and body language also play important roles; Americans usually stand farther apart when speaking than

South Americans. When greeting a regular client, lawyers often use a handshake in America, an *abrazo* in Mexico, and a bow in Korea (with the depth of bow signaling the level of respect). Common gestures can also have radically different meanings depending on the cultural context; for example, the hand signal widely used by Americans to mean “okay” is considered obscene by Brazilians.



Pay attention to gestures and body language

Lawyers may pick up on these communication nuances naturally if they have traveled a lot internationally or have strong intuitive skills. Others may want to learn about the business customs of different cultures from the resources listed below.

Relationships

In many cultures, personal relationships are a prerequisite to a significant business relationship. Incorporating a client’s cultural rituals into the relationship can build critical rapport. For example, the famed ritual of exchanging

and appreciating the other person’s business card is important in Japan and many other cultures.

Lawyers should also understand the cultural implications of entertaining, and gift giving and receiving. If they don’t

Speak the client's native tongue, lawyers should try to learn basic courtesies in the client's language like "please," "thank you," "you are welcome," as well as toasts and appropriate greetings. Interspersing those pleasantries in conversation shows an appreciation for the client's language.

Being culturally sensitive also means anticipating religious beliefs. For example, a Texas lawyer should not count on serving a prime Texas steak to a prospective Indian client without confirming whether the client is a Hindu—who does not eat beef.

As they cultivate relationships with foreign clients, American lawyers should heed cultural differences in group dynamics, gender and hierarchy. For example, because group consensus is important in Japan, a lawyer should expect that a Japanese client may want to build team consensus before making an important decision.

Different cultures also treat time differently. For example, Americans tend to be much more punctual than their Middle Eastern and Latin American counterparts. Similarly, a deadline-focused American who asks clients questions like "Will you make a decision by next Tuesday morning?" may strike certain foreign clients as too pushy. Lawyers who want to build relationships with foreign clients should respect and anticipate these cultural differences, taking the time necessary to build rapport in a manner comfortable for the client.

Resources

Lawyers who want to improve their cultural acumen can consult books like: Frank Acuff's *How to Negotiate Anything with Anyone Anywhere Around the World*; Roger Axtell's two books, *Gestures*, and *Do's and Taboos Around the World*; Richard Mead's *Cross-Cultural Management Communication*; and the *Culture Shock* series. Accessing foreign programs via satel-

lite TV is a way to observe body language and develop an "ear" for the volume, speed, and pitch at which a country's natives speak.

Websites maintained by the U.S. State Department, the CIA and foreign countries themselves provide a wealth of information about foreign cultures. To get an American perspective on a particular foreign country's customs, lawyers can call the State Department and speak to an officer assigned to that nation's "country desk."



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Lawyers can also chat with international lawyers who are experienced with a particular country. The international sections of local bar associations, the State Bar of Texas, and the American Bar Association are filled with international lawyers willing to share their wisdom. Cultural experts like inter-cultural consultants, city protocol office staffers, employees of internationally-focused nonprofits (like the World Affairs Council), and even university professors in foreign language departments, often have

cultural insights to share. All of these resources can significantly boost a lawyer's understanding of and comfort with foreign business customs.

Every Communication is a Rainmaking Opportunity

Every client communication—whether a telephone conversation, a bill for services rendered, or conversation at a social gathering—is a client development opportunity. In each circumstance, a lawyer should ask, "How can I communicate in a culturally sensitive way?" Lawyers who succeed at making their foreign client feel comfortable, appreciated and understood become their firm's international rainmakers.



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