

Business Etiquette in Latin America

LATINOAMERICANOS

Phrases like "in America" or "I'm from America" (especially when speaking Spanish) when referring to the United States is confusing or offensive to Latin American people as America is a continent, not just the United States. Therefore, all people born in the American continent are Americans. People from the United States of America are referred to by their nationality, "estadounidense" or "Norte Americano" (lit. "United-Statian" or "North-American"). (But of course "North-American" is problematic for exactly the same reason just mentioned. Canada and Mexico are also part of the North American continent.)

EXPRESSIONS TO AVOID

Using Mexican Spanish phrases and interjections like "Chihuahua", "Caramba", "Ándale", "Taco" "Whole enchilada" (Mexican Taco Bells advertise Tacos as Tacostadas or Tachitos) or "bad words" thinking that by doing so you will "blend in" is sometimes seen as mocking and disrespectful coming from tourists.

BUSINESS ATTIRE

Dress is important for making a good impression. Latin Americans are quite fashion conscious. It is important therefore to dress smartly and conservatively: suits and ties for men, unrevealing business suits and dresses for women. Argentina is probably the most formal of the Latin American countries and Brazil the least formal.

GREETING

Whereas in the US, people will happily meet and just say "hello, nice to meet you", in Latinoamerica, the correct physical contact is essential to build trust and respect with others.

You are expected to greet the people you meet, and say good-bye when you leave. Shaking someone's hand is the most commonly accepted form of greeting for business colleagues and clients. Handshakes are relatively brief. While eye contact during a handshake is advisable, do not be offended or surprised if they don't reciprocate. Eye contact and physical proximity is regional, and in some ethnic groups, for instance, it is disrespectful to hold someone's gaze.

- **Men Meeting Men:** Men usually shake hands when they meet and before they depart each other's company. A hug is often shared between friends.
- **Men Meeting Women:** In social situations, women may lean toward you to kiss; you should follow through with a light kiss on the cheek (only one, unlike Italy or Spain, for example, where the custom calls for a kiss in each cheek). Most women will simply offer a handshake.
- **Women Meeting Women:** In social situations where women know each other, women will always hug and kiss each other on the cheek.

PERSONAL SPACE

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Latin American people have a smaller sense of personal space than people from English-speaking cultures. Expect your conversational partner to stand close to you and look you in the eyes, and be prepared for a plus casual touching. Latin businessman may hold your elbow while conversing, or walk down the street arm-in-arm. To withdraw from this touch would be considered insulting and unfriendly, and may result in mistrust. Simple forms of gallantry are observed and thus a man walking down the street with a woman may insist on walking on the curve, to shield her from street traffic. Similarly, he would pull her chair, help with her coat, give up his seat in a bus.

NAMES AND TITLES

Ask your clients how they like to be called, by first or last name. In a formal Usted or informal tú.

Use their title and surname. In Mexico, when dealing with someone with an academic degree in a formal situation, is important to refer to people by their title. For a BA-level, whether they graduated or not, the term is Ingeniero (engineer) and Licenciado (attorney). For graduates of higher education is usually "doctor" or doctor. Another common title is Master "maestro" . If used outside a formal situation, the titles might sound ironic.

CONCEPT OF TIME

In all Latin countries, punctuality is not rigid because of the emphasis on personal obligations, a 30 minute delay should not be a surprise. In fact, among close associates, it is recommended that, when setting times for appointments, ask "la hora inglesa, o la hora latina?" This means "the English hour" (meaning "Promptly at the time specified?") or "the Latin hour" (meaning a half an hour later than the agreed upon time"). Punctuality is not generally observed, at least in informal settings, however more punctuality is expected for business matters. Time is not money "just the facts Mam comes with dessert".

WARM, FRIENDLY AND EXPRESSIVE.

Compared to the English-speaking world, people from areas of Latin America may demonstrate more relaxed and casual behavior and be more comfortable with loud talk, exaggerated gestures and physical contact. Public displays of affection are generally fine.

Latinos are **very warm and friendly** people and enjoy social conversation before getting down to business. This is a calculated process aimed at getting to know you personally. Latinos tend to be more interested in you, the person, than you as a representative of some faceless corporation. Latinos like to talk about their family and their country of origin.

The old Mexican saying is that "North Americans live to work, but Mexicans work to live!" Respect their sense of time and traditions. If your natural tendency is to speak quickly or you have a forceful or sharp tone of voice, become aware of how you are coming across it could be ok with Argentineans but not with Mexicans.. Become sensitive to the pace and tone used. Otherwise you will destroy a relationship with a caustic tone and behavior.

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In addition to varying greatly from one individual to another and along various demographic lines, this tendency towards comparatively warm and relaxed behavior does not necessarily hold true among many communities of indigenous peoples.

GOOD MANNERS and SOCIAL TABOOS

Women expect doors to be opened for them by males. This also applies to lighting of cigarettes, turning off mobile phones in dates or appointments, and helping them to their seat. None of these actions are construed as flirtatious but simply as a gentleman courtesy gesture.

Positioning yourself so your back is not facing another person is customary in Latin-American. If a person's back is facing another person, he or she must excuse himself or herself.

The least a host can offer a visitor is a glass of water. Several other kinds of drinks can be offered. Do not eat during meetings. If you must eat, you should offer whatever you are eating to your guest. If you are the guest and you are offered food you must accept.

Try to familiarize yourself with proper table manners. Always keep your hands visible when eating. Keep your wrists resting on the edge of the table. When you have finished eating, place your knife and fork across your plate with the prongs facing down and the handles facing to the right. Do not sit down until you are invited to and told where to sit. Do not begin eating until the hostess starts. It is polite to leave some food on your plate after a meal.

Hats and sunglasses should not be worn indoors.

It is considered bad manners to sneeze, cough or yawn without covering your mouth with your hand or with a handkerchief. Blowing your nose at a table is frowned upon. Other public displays of bodily functions are generally considered rude and should be avoided.

Be aware that the following gestures can cause problems:

1. The sign for "OK" formed by your forefinger and thumb is offensive in Brazil.
2. Putting your hands on your hips is a gesture signaling a challenge in Argentina, and putting your feet on the table is rude.
3. Raising your fist to head level is a gesture associated with Communism in Chile.
4. Putting your hands in your pockets is rude in Mexico.
5. It is often considered rude to point at a person or even an object with the index finger. People typically point with the whole hand or with a movement of the head and a puckering of the lips towards that which is being indicated.

RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATIONS

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- . The right connections facilitate business success.
- . You will be judged by the person who introduces you and changing this first impression is nearly impossible.
- . Since the initial meeting is generally with someone of high stature, it is important that your delegation include an upper-level executive.
- . After the initial getting-to-know-you meeting, the senior executive may not attend meetings or be visible.
- . This indicates you are now getting down to business and they are no longer needed to smooth the introduction.
- . Demonstrating trustworthiness, sincerity, and integrity are crucial to building relationships.
- . Expect to answer questions about your personal background, family and life interests.

BUSINESS MEETINGS ETIQUETTE

- . Business appointments are required and should be made at least 2 weeks in advance. Reconfirm the appointment one week before the meeting.
- . 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 contact you.
- . It is important that you arrive on time for meetings, although your Mexican business associates may be up to 30 minutes late.
- . Do not appear irritated if this occurs as people often run behind schedule.
- . Meetings may be postponed with little advance warning.
- . Initial meetings are formal.
- . Have all written material available in both English and Spanish.
- . Agendas are not common. If they are given, they are not always followed.

BUSINESS NEGOTIATIONS

- . Since Mexicans are status conscious, you should always have someone on your negotiating team who is an executive.
- . If you do not speak Spanish, hire an interpreter.
- . It will take several meetings to come to an agreement.
- . Face-to-face meetings are preferred over telephone, letters or email.
- . Negotiations and decisions take a long time. You must be patient.
- . Deadlines are seen as flexible and fluid, much like time itself.
- . Negotiations will include a fair amount of haggling. Do not give your best offer first.
- . Do not include an attorney on your negotiating team.

BUSINESS CARDS

- . Business cards are exchanged during introductions with everyone at a meeting.
- . It is advisable to have one side of your business card in Spanish.
- . Business cards should contain both your professional and educational qualifications.
- . Present your business card with the Spanish side facing the recipient.

SENSITIVE ISSUES

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Many elements of U.S. American culture left an imprint on life in Latin America, but be advised on ever bringing up topics or discussion of subjects about the impact of U.S. Foreign policy.

In Mexico avoid discussions on politics, national differences between US and Mexico, and especially racial/ethnic issues. Mexican-Americans in the USA as an ethnic group have experienced discrimination. Mexicans are highly aware of the historical conflict with the United States, as well economic disparity; political crises and global diplomatic issues are not discussed without respect and appropriate sympathy.

In general avoid issues as past political problems, South American levels of poverty. Also in Argentina avoid the Malvinas/Falkland War it is a very sensitive issue that should probably be avoided unless you are very familiar with it. If you call the Islands "Falkland" rather than "Malvinas", you will be seen as supporting the British side of the conflict, and thus considered hostile to the country.

Race: Latin Americans have a history of the merger of the European and indigenous races into the mestizo, and in other nations like Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Panama, Colombia and Venezuela have large percentages of African and mixed race African/Caucasian ancestors. In Costa Rica, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, many of the inhabitants rather identify themselves as "white" or castizo, a variant of the colonial casta system no longer in official practice, but each Latin American country has a unique different identity of their own. A few like Guatemala and Paraguay have a larger racial Amerindian minority and most inhabitants speak an indigenous language.

GIFTS

Small host gifts are accepted in most Latin countries. Gifts are generally opened when received, and the receiver is both expected to make some degree of fuss about it, as well as insisting that the giver should not have bothered, thus showing their gratitude.

FEES

Expect cash. Banks are generally not trusted.