

Communicating Across Cultures

BY SYLVIA BOYD

Maybe they didn't tell you when you took the job that you would be getting e-mails from members in India and Argentina and dealing with volunteers from South Africa and Australia. Or that you would lead a trade mission to Dubai and host occasional delegations from China. But you're not alone being in touch with people from all parts of the world. U.S.-based associations are globalizing at a rapid pace, increasingly challenging their staffs to communicate across cultures. Whether you're in charge of marketing, membership, events, IT or if you're the CEO, chances are you need to prepare your association to address the needs of members outside the United States.

You would be surprised how many simple changes you can make to appear less U.S.-centric. For starters, make sure your address includes the country everywhere it is printed and that your phone and fax numbers include the country code in front of the area code. Reformatting your address and contact numbers on your letterhead, e-mail signature and marketing materials tells your foreign customers that you have thought of their needs. Those are some of the first changes we made at The Institute of Internal Auditors when I was hired as international relations manager 10 years ago. Today, with half of our membership located in 165 countries outside the United States, we want to portray our offices as truly global headquarters and increasingly omit our address altogether as that inevitably labels the IIA as a U.S. association.

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

Conferences and seminars are another area where small changes in the terminology used will make a huge difference. At the IIA, we no longer refer to our "winter" conference, keeping in mind the confusion it creates for those living in the southern hemisphere. We avoid referring to "early bird" specials and any other American colloquialisms and expressions that foreigners find difficult to understand. It helps to pay particular attention to the needs of Canadian members who are too often lumped



together with the American audience. For example, clearly list your prices in "U.S. dollars" or include both currencies if you also are targeting the Canadian market. If you want to attract members in Quebec or Montreal, you should consider adding French simultaneous interpretation to your events.

You probably noticed that people in some countries are a lot more formal in their communications than we tend to be in the United States. When responding to e-mails, you cannot go wrong if you mirror the style of the person writing to you. If he is writing "Dear Mrs. Last Name" and using a formal salutation, respond likewise. If he is more direct and informal, feel free to do the same. And if the first name does not provide clues to the person's gender — or you're not even sure which is the first or last name — just repeat the entire name as given and you'll be sure not to offend anyone.

You can really impress your co-workers with this piece of global trivia: In Iceland, people take their father's first name as their family name; men add "son" and women add "dottir" at the end. So Christian Agustson's daughter Lilja would be named Lilja Christiandottir. And his son Jacob would be Jacob Christianson. That country makes it really easy to determine people's gender!

BUILD YOUR LIBRARY

There are many books you can consult that include tips and tricks to communicate across cultures (see box). It is a good idea

to set up a library in your offices with materials to consult before traveling abroad, when verbal contact will be the main form of communication with other cultures. Always read up on the country you are visiting for the do's and don'ts so you will be prepared. You should make sure you know how people greet each other and what different gestures and signs may mean. Body language is as important to understand as verbal communication. When the IIA president met recently with a dignitary from India, he was utterly confused by the man's constant shaking of his head throughout their conversation. He was very relieved to find out this simply meant the man was listening — not that he was disagreeing with him! 📌

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Resources

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