

BUSINESS CUSTOMS AND PRACTICES IN FRANCE

- C Building and developing a business relationship
- C Formality and communication style
- C Public and private spheres
- C Written and verbal/non-verbal communication
- C Business entertaining/dining etiquette
- C Host/guest expectations
- C Topics of conversation
- C Attire
- C Presentation styles and challenges
- C Use of humor
- C Male/female relations
- C Business negotiations
- C Decision-making
- C Change tolerance
- C Conflict resolution
- C Faux-pas to avoid
- C Final advice

Document written by Gilles Asselin and Ruth Mastron, 1999, SoCoCo Intercultural, Inc.
Email: culture@sococo.com, Website: www.sococo.com

Feel free to use this paper as you want as there is no copyright attached to it.
We would however appreciate a reference to our company before any distribution. Thank you.

Gilles Asselin & Ruth Mastron.

Business Customs and Practices in France

1) Building and developing a business relationship

Building a relationship with your French counterparts can be one of the most challenging tasks you face in your adventure in France. It could easily be said that in the US, the business drives the relationship, while in France, the relationship usually drives the business. To a certain extent, if a French person doesn't like you, he or she isn't going to do business with you. An American dealing with an abrasive potential client may reason, "Well, the guy's a real pain, but it's a terrific deal." A French person is more likely to think, "I may lose a good deal but at least I won't have to deal with that boor."

Trust is the basis of every good relationship in the US. It is the keystone that supports the entire relationship. Things do not always work the same way in France. You may encounter an initial barrier of distrust until you prove that you are a valuable person to deal with. In a culture that emphasizes relationship and affect, people tend not to involve themselves very rapidly in any endeavor, be it personal or professional. There is always a "round of observation" that, for Americans, may seem to last forever. But this is an important stage for French people who need to figure out who you are before going any farther.

In addition, the task or achievement orientation of Americans makes it difficult for them to spend so much time building rapport with their French counterparts, especially when the business could be taken care of in minutes in the US! Yet in a culture that values affiliation and bonds with others, it is important to go through these long "discovery stages." They are needed to build a strong foundation on which a durable relationship can be built--a relationship that will enable people to do business or work together and achieve a mutually satisfying goal.

For American business people visiting France, it is important to be pleasant, efficient and well-prepared, but this alone might not obtain the results they would in the US. Once you realize the importance of relationships and the workings of the system in France, you will certainly agree that the time you spend building these initial bonds is well spent. You will be putting in the time at some point; it's far better to do it at the beginning than doing damage control later on.

In any case, don't suggest exchanging business cards right away--establish rapport first.

2) Formality and communication style

Formality is a constant underlying feature of social and professional life in France. French people distinguish between their family, friends and close working relationships, which they address with the casual "tu", and other relationships (strangers, acquaintances, hierarchical and formal relations), which call for a more distant "vous." This distinction is important as you will most likely be included in the second category for a long time, regardless of the language you're using.

This formal distance may seem a bit chilly after all the advice about relationships. It's the result of hundreds of years of social stratification in France. Traditionally, the French show respect and deference in such things as greetings and use of last names. Therefore, do not expect to use your host's first name right from the beginning and greet people with a light (one pump) handshake and a "Bonjour Monsieur/Madame" plus your name and "enchanté(e)" (nice to meet you).

Politeness is an every-day rule that opens (or closes) a lot of doors. Gallantry toward women for males should be the rule: women go through doors first (*Après vous, je vous en prie*--after you, please), and are normally first out of the elevator (safety rules). Gallantry is still very much appreciated and is a proof of good upbringing, education and *savoir-vivre*.

Relationships might become more casual as time goes on but even fairly good friends may still use the formal "vous." Use of first names may come quite rapidly if dealing with a person of similar age and social setting or status.

French people usually shake hands the first time they see someone but not always when they see the person again. Kisses on the cheeks (*la bise, se faire la bise*) come fairly easily in social settings; i.e., between women, between men and women, but never between men except for close relatives! This custom is also practiced in the French work place (the first time colleagues see each other in the New Year, for example) but don't expect to experience it yourself on your first trip to France!

French mothers remind their children to stand up straight and stop dragging their feet. French posture and body attitudes may appear stiff and restrained to Americans, while Americans' casual posture and movements appear sloppy and uncultured to the French. Don't swing your arms wide when walking, speak to someone with your hands in your pocket or tip back your chair, and never put your feet on desks or chairs.

3) Public and private spheres

Another characteristic of the French is their initial reserve and private character. Do not try to mention all of your family members as a way to introduce yourself--this is likely to be a total flop as you would be invading one of the French private realms. French people bring to the workplace fewer private matters than Americans do, and you will rarely see family pictures on the desk.

In addition to the hierarchical distance created by status and power, French reluctance toward sharing private matters in the workplace makes them look cold, distant or aloof to American eyes. But don't forget that what seems "obvious" from an American perspective isn't necessarily the same from a French point of view--or a British or Japanese one, for that matter.

As you develop your relationship with your French colleague, you will have access to more

information about his or her private domain. Consider this privilege a mark of goodwill (good relationship) and be ready to reciprocate with similar information. When in doubt about when to provide this kind of personal information, simply let your host take the initiative, either by asking you questions or opening the door to a closer relationship.

You'll know you've been admitted to a French person's inner circle when you are invited to share a family dinner at your colleague's home. This may happen fairly quickly among younger people of similar status; it may happen after a year or two, or it may simply never happen even though you think you've reached a very significant point in your relationship. If you don't succeed, never take it personally as French people treat everyone the same and might never develop a friendship with their local colleagues, even after five or ten years.

4) Written and verbal/non-verbal communication

The French are almost always less direct than Americans and depend on nuances of meaning in many cases. The French language is also much less precise than English and contains fewer words. Often, the meaning of a specific word is context-bound. Humor, sometimes sarcastic, may be used to convey a message obliquely.

A good example of differences in action is the meaning of a manager's office "closed door." In the French work place it may signify nothing more than a need for privacy and tranquility. Interruptions are almost always welcome if appropriate. If inappropriate, the visitor will most likely receive some verbal and/or non-verbal cues expressing the step to follow: "Wait just five minutes and I'll be with you," while talking on the phone and showing the clock.

Similarly, look around when you're attending a meeting and you will notice that a lot of things are happening: certain people may come in late, others might always sit next to each other, side conversations or comments may even take place during a presentation. In addition, the French do not hesitate to interrupt, argue and criticize if they feel it's needed. An argument, even a heated one, is usually considered a positive thing that brings about conversation and ideas.

The high-context, less direct and subtle features of French communication patterns accord with the way information is distributed or granted. Often it is considered a power tool and is therefore sought out by people. In this respect, take into account the importance of personal relationship networks; they usually allow people to learn and achieve much more than what is theoretically possible.

Using a foreign language (even English) may play an important role in your counterparts' communication patterns, and they may not understand as well as you think they do. French people will rarely openly admit that they didn't understand as it would cause them a loss of face. This can result in serious misunderstandings that you discover only later on. Also, pay attention to your counterpart's facial expression as French people tend to use strong non-verbal cues when confused, lost or experiencing difficulty. Other typical gestures and expressions include the

infamous Gallic shrug, grimaces and different kinds of smiles.

Don't be afraid to rephrase your sentences and get feedback about their understanding of the discussion by asking open-ended questions. Build in some extra time in your meeting plan so you can use this communication technique as often as needed.

Finally, it's always good to put things in writing: French people love writing and reading, and memos are usually well accepted and less formal than a letter. When calling someone overseas to confirm a meeting date, appointment or some other important matter, it's generally a good idea to follow up with a fax, memo or e-mail. Especially while discussing technical details on the phone (which often require a specific jargon), give your French counterpart a chance to process the information by reading a copy of what you mean or want.

Electronic mail might be a nice and efficient way to speed up communication and reduce costs. However, remember that such a communication tool will sometimes rub the French the wrong way, due to its casualness and absence of proper form. It shouldn't take the place of a personal call and it's usually better to implement it once a good relationship is already under way.

5) Business entertaining/dining etiquette

For a business lunch or dinner in a restaurant, the person who invites the others pays the bill as discreetly as possible--you might excuse yourself for a moment to slip your credit card to the waiter and sign the receipt so that nothing suggesting payment is ever brought to the table. Note that 15% tip (*service compris*) and VAT (20.6%) are included in the bill. If you are sharing a social meal with friends, the French generally divide the amount evenly by the number of diners--don't ever work out each person's share on a paper napkin or with a calculator on the table. And never ask for a doggy bag at the end of the meal as your friends or colleagues will most certainly look down on you.

A French meal is very structured and sequentially organized. Follow the pace and try to eat at least a little of everything, even if you don't like it.

Don't put your hands under the table nor your elbows on the table. Keep your left hand on the table while you eat. French people cut their meat with their fork in the left hand and their knife in the right and usually do not switch their fork after dropping their knife. French table manners are sometimes tough for Americans but don't worry too much about using utensils "continental" style. Neatness and elegance are more important than which hand holds the knife.

Coffee is never drunk with a meal but comes afterwards. If you're not drinking wine, a bottle of water is always available: *eau minérale ou gazeuse*, mineral or sparkling water. Always use the bigger glass for water.

Cheese is considered a real course but it is not mandatory. If you like it, take two or three kinds,

mild ones preferably, and be careful to cut out your portion off so that the shape of the large piece of cheese is maintained.

6) Host and guest expectations

If visiting a closely-affiliated company or the headquarters of your company, you may expect a dinner at home by the end of your trip or even before. At the very least, there will be a couple of restaurant meals with people you are or will be working with--building relationships again! If you're a guest in someone's home, it's a good idea to bring something for the wife (she is the hostess and the queen of the house). Flowers or plants are appreciated. The number, color and type of flowers have very specific meanings. One dozen PINK roses are a safe choice to thank your hostess; never give chrysanthemums under any circumstances as they are for funerals and gravesites. Bring gifts for the kids if you know them: American candies like Jelly Bellies, T-shirts with the name of your town or state (but not company--except entertainment companies like Disney), or the latest kid's and teenager's gadgets from the US.

It's a good idea to make some efforts at the language and ask questions about it. Don't be afraid to ask your host to correct you, since the French like to do this (they are very picky about their language but tolerant with foreigners).

In any circumstances, do not "make yourself at home" or "help yourself." French hosts do not normally show guests over the house. Do not wander around if you need something--ask for it and don't follow the person who goes into another room to get it for you. Closed doors in a private home mean no admittance, except for the toilet. It may be in a separate room from the bathroom, so be precise when you ask for directions! Do not use the English word "bathroom" as it is confusing for the French. A bathroom is a room where you wash yourself or take a bath. To be on the safe side, use the word "toilettes." It may also be a good idea to knock on the door of the toilet before you open it.

French hostesses do not expect their guests to lend a hand in the kitchen, setting or clearing the table, etc. The kitchen is her private area; so don't just wander in there! If you are asked to help out, consider it a sign of admittance into the family.

Tell your host or hostess ahead of time if you have a problem with a specific food (allergy and so on). People will understand your problem and it is always better than not touching the food at all.

Accept wine in your glass but be aware that a good host keeps his or her guest's glass full, so take little sips to ensure you are not refilled too often! If you object to alcohol or prefer not to drink, allude to liver problems and be prepared for solicitous offers of various liver-friendly mineral waters.

7) Topics of conversation

Avoid money and religion at all costs. They are very private topics.

Talk about politics only if you are an expert or need an explanation about a specific event--you can always ask questions and expect a lively exchange of ideas.

Beware of privacy violation or invasion when talking about family and other personal matters.

Safe topics would be life in the US compared to France, any kind of information related to the business setting, personal experiences traveling abroad, historical and cultural topics.

Your conversational topics and ability mark you as a cultivated or uncultivated person, so keep informed on current events, literary and art news, etc. Be prepared to discuss these topics intelligently, or at least ask intelligent questions! Good topics of conversation are typically American art forms (e.g., jazz), important American creative and performing artists, US historical and literary sites, etc. Know your own country and its culture--the French will generally have lots of questions for you!

Knowing a little bit of French history helps as it bears so much importance to the French. If you need detailed explanation of any monument, battle, invasion or French victory, many people will usually come to your rescue to display their knowledge of French history. Make sure to acknowledge their "help" gratefully and ask follow-up questions. They will most certainly like it!

Always remember that there is a big difference between asking for information about a certain topic and bluntly giving your opinion about it. Important differences exist between diversity the French and the American way, as reflected by French labor laws and American affirmative action practices. This could be an interesting avenue for you to explore!

8) Attire

How you dress mostly depends on the purpose of the meeting or presentation. It may be more formal the first day of your visit and casual the other days: it would go from a business suit to a more creative ensemble.

A skirt or dress should be fine for a woman. French women do not generally wear stockings or pantyhose in the summer. A dark blue suit might be more appropriate for a board meeting or a meeting with important people. Pants are also accepted if they fit with the rest of the attire. Men should wear a business suit initially, and, depending on circumstances, take a more casual outfit for later: separate jacket and pants.

There is no widely accepted "dress-down" practice at all but men could occasionally take their tie off, depending on the setting. Things are changing, though, and depending on the industry

and geographic location, you may be surprised to see your French colleagues in jeans or similarly casual outfits on a routine basis. In some trendy professions like advertising and public relations, or in certain departments like programming, dress can be quite original!

French people do not always consider it important to wear something different every day of the week. Clothing is relatively expensive and they prefer a small number of quality items than many cheaper ones. Don't be surprised to see someone wear the same outfit two days in a row. This practice has given rise to stereotypes about French hygiene, but this shouldn't detract from success of your visit.

9) Presentation styles and challenges

Your biggest challenge in a French presentation is to get yourself understood and your message across. You need to be aware of non-verbal signals from the audience.

Speak slowly and avoid idioms ("ballpark figure," "run with it," etc.). Rephrase what might not have been understood. You need to judge the level of understanding of your audience by its reactions, but don't put people on the spot by asking direct questions like: "Do you understand?" Even if people do not understand your point, they won't openly admit their limitations.

The substance and conclusion of a presentation (*le fond*) are far more important to the French than the materials you would be using (*la forme*). While clear and legible transparencies or documents will help, do not try to impress your audience with the latest state-of-the-art technology. There is a good chance that you won't succeed. The French tend to suspect that slick or razzle-dazzle presentations are trying to cover up a lack of substance. Presentation skills are not taught in French business schools and presentation techniques usually reflect a lack of emphasis on style.

The typical American presentation starts out with a story or a joke. In France, such ice-breakers are not necessary and you can get straight to the point more rapidly. People might not understand the point of the story, especially if it's just an "intro," and might not really relate to what follows. Be aware that French people often look for logic and coherence in arguments and presentations. Later on, the use of metaphors and stories is recommended, but make sure they can be understood by all. This is especially important when with a diverse audience. Personal real-life experiences are powerful but keep them in the business area.

10) Use of humor

Wit and repartee are very much part of the French daily scene. Even in a foreign language, these skills are important and the use of English repartee is always better than no response at all. French people will appreciate it and will throw the ball at you more often. Keep playing as you're making good points. As in any foreign culture, avoid any kind of condescending humor (even

though the French are master players at this game!).

The French like to tell jokes and have a plethora about sex, of course. They usually have a good sense of humor, not too far from the US one, which often sounds cynical to visitors. In fact, French children are used to tease each other at a very young age and a good sense of humor, even a sarcastic one, is almost a must for anyone who wants to survive in the French competitive education system.

What you might often take as a bitter or offending remark is in fact a proof of good friendship and high respect. That a person can afford such a demeaning sting tells a lot about the strength of the relationship. In other cases, it's just pure sarcasm, one of the many intellectual weapons French people love to use.

11) Male/female relations

Gender relations in general are good but different social expectations exist for women. France is considered a more feminine society than the US, meaning it defines roles that are strictly reserved for men and women. It would be hard to imagine a French woman fighting in the battlefield as the French state would rather prevent her from being killed. In a similar vein, women are not expected to be assertive or aggressive but rather caring and protective.

The relationship between men and women is not as adversarial and centered around issues of sexism as in the US. French women value their femininity, i.e., what makes them look feminine and distinguishes them from men. They are not fighting for special rights, as feminism in Europe tends to be folded in to general social movements. They already have mandatory paid maternity leave, job protection upon return, health care, child allowances, childcare, etc.

There is definitely more "flirting" in the work place, which can be initiated by either men or women. It is in fact a game that everyone is free to play or not to play. This might be essential to preserve the French reputation for romance that knows no boundaries. From an American perspective, this attitude could easily be considered sexual harassment.

There is no shared notion of glass ceiling even though it is true that very few women have reached the top echelons in large multinational companies. Ambitious French women tend to work in their own companies or in profession that allows them to develop their creativity and intuition: fashion, advertising, and public relations.

12) Business negotiations

The French usually begin a business negotiation with a series of general considerations and statements before getting down to the details. For example, they want to discuss the general business climate, economic trends, market conditions, and competing companies and their

turnovers before discussing the financial details of the sale or profits to be made from the proposal. The abundance of background information is important to the French because they like to map things out and therefore need to be well aware of the context in which they find themselves.

Americans tend to concentrate earlier in a conversation on the "bottom line" details of how to reduce costs and increase profits from the deal under negotiation. Americans who are used to adopting a much more pragmatic approach can find the intellectual approach of the French unsettling. Increasing profits and market share is also important to the French but the "bottom line" approach will never gain in France the popularity it does in US corporate settings. To be so concerned about money and profits would be considered rude in France where panache, style, and intellectual wit (even cleverness) are usually held in high regard.

The French do not buy into the notion of a level playing field. Whoever has a dominant position or knows any critical information might as well take advantage of it. When it comes to business ethics, French boundaries are not as clear-cut or black and white as they usually are in the US. Rather, they depend on the context and the people you are dealing. It is a very important point to remember as it might influence the outcome of the deal.

When entering a negotiation, keep in mind that the French like to disagree for the sake of discussion and new ideas. Also, time being much less of an issue in France as it is in the US, there is a strong likelihood that your French counterparts won't be in a hurry to close the deal.

13) Decision-making process

The French are not so much concerned with consensus building. Individual ideas and contributions are well accepted within a group, but that does not mean they will be automatically acknowledged in the final decision.

The purpose of a meeting is generally to express or gather ideas, and bring some "water to the mill." You may have to voice your opinion forcefully in order to be heard in the middle of the hubbub.

In general, the French decision-making process is much longer than in the US, with a greater need for information in a risk-averse culture. The French need to explore every avenue intellectually and practically before they can fill in the gaps. They try to gather as much information as possible before taking an important decision. Compared to US practices, the process is much more comprehensive and not so sequential. While trying to solve a problem, Americans tend to look immediately for solutions, while the French try first to understand the causes of the problem. Only then they feel sure they understand why and how the problem occurred do they feel prepared to solve it.

Time is much more fluid in France than it is in the US, and this also influences the outcome and

timing of the decision. The French do not necessarily feel they are "wasting time" when not working toward a specific goal. There are different, looser attitudes toward deadlines and not the same sense of urgency. In fact, conveying a sense of urgency to a French counterpart might be the second most challenging task for an American (after building a relationship), especially if you happen to be back in the US and can't have a strong effect on the overseas decision making process.

14) Change tolerance

French people have different perceptions of change and its opposite. A "no-change" or status-quo situation would mean stagnation or even death for many American managers while most French people would consider it a sign of continuity or stability.

These notions of change are clearly culture-bound. The French do not manage by "attitude" (i.e., you need to have a "positive attitude" if you want to accomplish this or that). While describing French attitudes, we usually refer to "the French mentality" which, due to the importance and weight of the past, is rooted at a much deeper level. It generally takes a lot of time and patience to change things in France, especially outside of urban areas.

If you were in charge of a development or reorganization project, you would need to "sell" your modifications or changes with the benefits that come along. It would almost be similar to a public relations campaign. The soft-sell approach usually works better than the hard-sell, aggressive attitude. You would need to answer one of the most important questions for the French, "Why," and develop your reasoning. People might not agree with you, but if you show them the logic and value behind the change, they should become more open, and might even be willing to argue with you!

15) Conflict resolution

The French are usually not afraid of conflict and ready to voice their opinion, sometimes very bluntly. A conflict is often times seen as a positive way to bridge differences between people and does not necessarily alter the relationship between them. Sometimes, it even clarifies the situation and colleagues enjoy a renewed peace of mind. Other times, the air becomes chillier as it is not possible for French people to get along with everyone!

Usually, international relations are quite cordial if not always harmonious. In a French environment, conflict is pretty much inevitable, but it is rarely perceived negatively. This might be something you just have to get used to and in return assert your position forcefully. In any case, try not to lose your composure as it is part of the "hot blooded" characteristic of the French.

Usually, criticism and discontent are expressed toward a specific topic or piece of work. It is rarely directed at a person and you should not take it personally even though people might seem

to be getting at you particularly.

In a context-bound "post-revolutionary" society, methods of resolving a conflict depends on the situation, stakes and interested parties. This is especially true if the parties involved come from different hierarchical levels and background. Resolution of more serious conflicts may sometimes take place behind the scenes or within one's own relationship network. A middle person or mediator would certainly be a good person for resolving a long-lasting conflict.

16) Faux-pas to avoid

Invading people's privacy with personal questions about job or family matters would be a major faux-pas.

Avoid touching people in the workplace; don't put your hand on someone's arm or shoulder, do not use any friendly back-slapping or shoulder-punching.

Rushing things at all costs and neglecting the human side of a deal or a project won't get you far in France.

Avoid the aggressive, hard-sell approach. The French will not be impressed when you tell them that your American know-how is just what they need to get them out of the mess they are in. They might not agree that they are in a mess at all! The typical American self-confidence, "sell yourself" approach strikes the French as arrogant and abrasive.

The business drives the relationship in the US. Do not forget it is usually the opposite in France: I may not do business with you if I don't like you or don't know enough about you. French people are generally suspicious of "unknown" people.

17) Final advice

Say what you mean. Be straight and to the point. Be honest when you don't like something.

The French like people with personality: those who do not simply follow the shepherd and are able to "bring some water to the mill." The French sometimes regard consistency as boring, and being boring is the worst sin!

Give French people a good chance to get to know you. Do not rush the relationship. Establishing and building rapport and trust are not singled out as they are in the US but they are small parts of a bigger process.

Be patient and learn to appreciate the small wonders that French life has to offer. Quality of time as a whole, and not especially quality of work time, is of great importance. Doing something you

enjoy is a French way of living.

Do not be over-enthusiastic and use superlatives like great, wonderful, or terrific. They are not popular in France and sound insincere.

Do not give a "too positive or rosy" image that French people might consider arrogance or hypocrisy. "A cat is a cat" in France (or "a spade is a spade" in English) and the French do not sugar-coat or mince words.

Finally, acknowledge the cultural importance of food and wine and understand the primary purpose of a French business lunch: to get to know each other and enjoy a good conversation. A three-hour business lunch is the French equivalent of a one-day ropes adventure team building program, even if you do not discuss business at all. Be deeply convinced of this.

18) French Holidays

January 1	New Year's Day
Late March/April	Easter Monday (Religious)
May 1	Labor Day
May 8	Liberation Day (WWII)
Sixth Thursday after Easter	Ascension Day (Religious)
Second Monday after Ascension	Pentecost (Religious)
July 14	Bastille Day (National Day)
August 15	Feast of the Assumption (Religious)
November 1	All Saints' Day
November 11	Armistice Day (WWI)
December 25	Christmas

Les ponts (bridges): if a holiday falls on a Tuesday or Thursday, the Monday or Friday is often taken as well (the bridge), whether paid or not, to gain a 4-day weekend. The number of holidays in May, combined with *les ponts*, can make for a very light work month!