

Top Ten Do's & Don'ts
of
Japanese Cultural & Business Etiquette



DO'S



Be on time!

THE Golden Rule. Simply don't be late. This is considered blatantly disrespectful in Japan. Being excessively early is inappropriate, too. Aim to arrive 5-10 minutes before scheduled meeting time.



Pay careful attention to hierarchy.

With its feudal roots still firmly embedded, hierarchy plays a crucial role in both social and business relations in Japan. Bottom line: Pay due respect to seniors members of any group and pay attention to related protocol.



Treat business cards (*meishi*) with care and always be sure to have enough.

Business cards are considered the face of a person in Japan and are a key business currency. Treat them delicately when received, avoid marking them up or losing them, and carry more than you think you'll need.



Express gratitude and apologize (when sincere) frequently.

Thank you's and apologies go a long way in Japan. Think of an apology as saying you feel sorry about a circumstance or inconvenience, not that you are necessarily responsible for it. Apologies trump excuses.



Learn about gift-giving (*omiyage*) rituals.

Gift-giving is another long-standing and highly ritualized custom in Japan. Definitely take the time to research what kinds of gifts and presentation of gifts are appropriate for your business partners.



Try to do or say something Japanese; the effort goes a long way.

It doesn't matter if you get it exactly right or become fluent, but make an effort to learn a few cultural norms and a handful of words in Japanese. The effort will win you huge points and go a long way in relationship-building.



Remember that the group is more important than the individual.

Japan remains predominantly a group-based society where harmony, consensus and teamwork are prioritized over individual needs or recognition. Avoid singling someone out for attention, including yourself.



Summarize key points in writing and use visual supplements.

Generally speaking, because of the way they learn English, Japanese tend to have a stronger command of written English than spoken. Whenever possible, put key points in writing and use visual supplements.



Be well-groomed and on the formal, conservative side with appearance.

With some exceptions, professional appearance in Japan tends to be conservative/ formal. Dark and solid-colored suits, minimal accessories, clean shoes, a nice bag, and well-groomed hair are recommended.



Remember that relationships and trust are of paramount importance.

While these are virtues in many cultures, they are of utmost importance in Japanese business relations, arguably more so than efficiency, contracts, pricing, etc. It pays hugely to invest in relationship-building.

DON'TS



Don't directly challenge a senior person, especially in front of others.

The importance of hierarchy in Japan cannot be understated. It is critical not to make a more senior member of any group 'look bad' or 'lose face' in front of others.



Don't outwardly express negative (angry, frustrated, etc.) emotions.

Japanese consider open expression of emotions, especially negative ones, to be immature and indicative of lack of self-control. Even if you are upset, it's best to put on your best poker face and speak calmly.



**Don't refer to a Japanese person by first name unless instructed to do so.
Use last name + 'san' (but never use 'san' for yourself!)**

Use of Japanese first names is typically only for very familiar relations. Last name + 'san' demonstrates respect.



Don't decline an invitation to socialize.

Socializing after working hours is a critical part of relationship building in Japan and often where a lot of bridges are built. If interested in furthering business relations, accept any such invitation whenever possible.



Don't self-aggrandize; modesty is a virtue.

Modesty is a virtue in Japan, even to the point of self-deprecation. 'Tooting one's own horn' is frowned upon, as is praising one's own colleagues, family, etc.



Don't pour your own drink.

It is customary in Japan for people to pour drinks for other people, usually with more junior people serving more senior people. It's important to pay attention and fill someone's glass before it gets empty.



Don't wear flashy accessories, bright clothes or excessive perfume/cologne.

Perfumes and colognes are used much more sparingly in Japan. Accessories and clothes that are bright, busily patterned or flashy are not a professional norm in Japan either. Err on the side of subtle.



Don't engage in direct confrontation or aggressive tactics.

Japanese place great value on harmonious and non-confrontational behavior and communication. A softer and more diplomatic approach is almost always best with the Japanese.



Don't pass food with chopsticks or stick chopsticks in your rice.

These are both actions reserved for Buddhist ceremonies associated with death.



Don't make excuses.

When falling short of expectations, the best approach is simply to apologize for any inconvenience and express that you will work to resolve the problem.