

Crossing the Cultural Divide — France

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Appeared in 'Consumer Goods' magazine, May 2001

The French have always led with their culture..."

A Canadian Broadcasting Corporation television producer told me that years ago, and it may be the most concise analysis I've yet heard in explaining the social enigma that is France.

The British adopted – and helped develop – Swahili as Africa's lingua franca; London saw empire as primarily a commercial concern. The French were every bit as present in Africa but their colonial approach was to teach native children to recite "Nos ancêtres, les Gaulois..." ("Our ancestors, the Gauls...")

This is why an American planning to do business in France might consider spending a few hours doing some cultural homework before landing at Roissy-Charles-de-Gaulle.

In terms of hi-tech, global business, the French have a lot to offer: the "TGV" is considered to be better than Japan's "bullet-trains," the Ariane rocket competes with NASA for commercial contracts, the Exocet missile is among the planet's most popular weapons.

In many ways, the French can be seen as the Americans of Europe. France is essentially a Latin country where it snows each winter, a combination of cold Cartesian logic (philosopher René Descartes) and romantic – thus elastic – morals. Unlike both London and Berlin, Paris espouses American-style advertising strategies and the idea of "making a killing" (short-term gain as a strategy).

Insecurity Complex

The French – many of them at least, and certainly a majority of the business community – secretly admire Americans. Ironically, because of this, Americans in Paris are often treated with disdain as concerns culture, which is to say French culture.

The French insecurity complex leads them to be overly boastful about all things French. For example, Charles Trenet, an 87-year-old singer comparable to Tony Bennett, died just a few weeks ago. While most Americans went on with their lives, unaware of the magnitude of this tragedy, Trenet's agent talked on TV about how the crooner once played before the Queen of England and Paul McCartney. "Afterward, when they met him, they were almost shaking in their boots!" or so it appeared to him.

Like the English, the French have seen their global importance diminish to almost nothing in the past half-century. Without the self-deprecating British sense of humor, the French react defensively.

Scoring Points

On the other hand, if you (as a potential American partner) know who Charles Trenet was, if you can name a couple of his most famous songs, you'll score points. Resuscitating a few sentences of your high school French is also a good idea. Bruce Springsteen got a huge round of applause from a roomful of French journalists at a press conference when he began by saying, "Je m'excuse, je ne parle pas français." ("Excuse me, I do not speak French.")

Another thing about the French definition of culture: it encompasses just about everything. By the time you arrive in the country, you should know who the president and prime minister are, and what's in the news (a squabble with Britain over meat exports, a looming teachers' strike, etc.). Paris was the capital of the Western world – the French would say "the world" – less than a century ago. The French are very sensitive about not making the foreign front pages anymore, particularly as concerns the country that supplanted them, the U.S.

Saying "Paris is far more beautiful than New York!" is a very good idea. In fact, not bothering with that type of self-evident compliment will be perceived as insulting by your host. Whether it be art, music, architecture, food or philosophy, the French are absolutely certain theirs is second to none. If you agree, they're content... and inclined to think of you as someone with good taste.

Business As a Sensual Experience

This means doing business in France can be a tremendous sensual experience. Lunch is often more important than the pitch you just made. It's both a social test and a chance to shine. As formal as your hosts may have been in the office, they are usually just as convivial once the apéro (apéritif) is served. All you have to do is show how much you enjoy the food and drink and they'll be happy.

This is their turf – indeed, the French see fine cuisine as an art, comparable to painting and wine, and as something close to a religion – so allow them to share it with you. Ask for advice in ordering. Everyone at the table will have an opinion and most will know how various dishes are prepared, right down to the specific type of mushroom used, the liqueur in the sauce and the regional origin of the recipe.

It's no chore to appreciate these finer things in life, which were, in fact, created by the French and are part of their "civilization." Showing an interest in the work that goes into it, and unabashed pleasure in the result, will make your hosts glow with national pride. And treating business as something you leave at the office, as opposed to bringing up tomorrow's second round of meetings, will make them think you're a kindred spirit.

Management and Communication Styles

In France, a cadre (defined as an "executive" or "manager") interprets corporate

vision and strategies with a defined area of authority and accountability. The cadre is essentially self-reliant, refining a personal focus on problems rather than seeking the perspectives of others. The management style is thus individual, albeit within a hierarchy.

The education of a cadre stresses the ability to analyze effectively and formulate ideas clearly. This mirrors the fact that the French are immensely proud of their language. Priority is given to abstract knowledge and logical precision. Reasoning is deductive (general concept and principles), but communication is usually implicit (what is not said). This leads to contemplation and creativity.

When deciding on a course of action and giving orders, the cadre does not necessarily “involve” others to give them a sense of ownership in the process. There is less delegation of responsibility. Whereas a problem might be solved at a relatively low level in North America, it can go much higher in French management. There is a slowing down in the decision-making process – a certain bottleneck at the top.

Controlling (making sure that performance more or less corresponds to a plan) is a relatively weak concept in France. The cadre doesn't expect the intervention of superiors, which is seen as interference.

The French Meeting

In French meetings, there is more exchanging of information and less decision-making than in the Anglo-Saxon world. It takes longer to take action and a lot of people are involved. Americans often feel that the same point is argued over and over again and this can lead to irritation.

The French are more formal; they respect hierarchy and correct use of the language. (Americans, of course, tend to be fairly informal and use colloquial language.) Meetings are normally conducted in a polychronic manner – time is circular and many things are done at once. Participants may come and go as they please and even conduct private conversation. In order to avoid cultural misunderstandings, the participants should agree on behavioral norms. It can lead to some interesting intercultural synergies.

Until recently, there was greater mobility of labor in North America than in France. Most French employees stay with one company for a longer time, which means less cost for recruiting. French companies are more paternal, more concerned with the welfare of their employees.

Mind Your Manners

In informal settings, it is important to remember that the word “etiquette” originates from France. Demonstrations of grace, politeness and proper behavior at all times will increase respect. Outside the office, there are a wide variety of conversational topics from which to choose. The French are proud of their educational system, their literary and artistic accomplishments and their world-renowned cuisine. Other

subjects are jazz, the cinema, history, politics, sports and, of course, wine.

Working in France

Working in France can appear frustrating for Americans, as the French like to be independent in both politics and business. Furthermore, they believe they are the center of the world when it comes to politics, legal systems, haute cuisine and savoir vivre.

France is an extremely bureaucratic country. Count on complicated procedures and endless forms, which can reduce your chances for business success. Contrary to myth, France is not just a producer of fine cheeses and wines but an exporter of state-of-the-art technology, such as the TGV, Airbus and animation software. If you can overcome the barriers involved in the eccentric French way of doing business, your time can be highly rewarding.

Greetings

When meeting (and departing from) your French contact, a light handshake is customary. Women normally don't offer their hand. You should wait until the highest person in authority offers his hand. When addressing strangers, and even acquaintances, the French are very formal. Using last names is considered too up-front. Instead, you should address people as monsieur, madame or mademoiselle.

Business Tips

Meetings are seen as a vehicle for discussion, as opposed to a forum for decision-making, so they can last longer than planned. Aggressive selling is taboo. The business language is usually French, so hire a local agent or representative if you are unfamiliar with the language. When a meeting is in progress, don't be surprised if it is interrupted by incoming phone calls or drop-in visitors.

Be ready to debate. The French love a good, sometimes heated, philosophical discussion, and they interrupt one another quite frequently. The conversation is lively and unstructured. Every point of view will be thoroughly looked at and it doesn't matter who is right.

The government plays an important role in business. When you make money in France, it's better that you don't talk about it – money-making is still considered somewhat immoral. Although the French appear to be very formal in their business activities, there exists an unofficial network of connections which can play an important role in negotiations.

Detailed Negotiating

When negotiating with the French, prepare for the probability that it will take a long time for decisions to be reached. They are made after detailed discussions; every point must be examined. Decisions are made orally, with a written contract following top management's approval. The highest person in authority ultimately decides. The middle-management team with whom you deal may simply be messengers.

After exchanging generalities, get down to business but allow your host to lead the meeting. The French businessperson may want to maintain an air of superiority and may not make you feel very welcome (at least at the beginning). Don't take this personally. The French are firm believers in Cartesian logic and will analyze your arguments accordingly. Your presentation should be formal, informative, rational and if possible, have a little flair. Afterwards you can expect critical discussion.