



The Dos and Don'ts of Successful Business in China

How to avoid cultural and social foot faults that could cost you business

China is well and truly open for business. The fastest growing economy on the planet wants to do business with you. The opportunities are endless and profitable. So how is it that an umbrella could scupper your chances of striking a lucrative business deal?

"There's a lot more to doing business with China than simply finding a partner, striking terms and exchanging contracts" says Ting Zhang, founder and CEO of Cambridge Business Solutions, which works with companies wishing to create business partnerships in China.

Understanding the business rules of engagement, cultural differences and sensibilities and even superstitions can make or break a business relationship.

For example, the number 'four' should be avoided – whether it's a date for a contract signing ceremony or product model number.

"It isn't the figure that's the issue," says Ting, "it's the pronunciation. The Chinese word for four sounds like the word for death and is very unlucky.

Similarly, if you want to impress your Chinese host with a gift, don't give an umbrella. In Chinese, the word for umbrella sounds like the word for 'breaking up' and doesn't bode well for a long-term relationship.

Also don't give your Chinese counterpart a clock as it sounds like 'to see someone at their funeral' in Chinese.

Other numbers also carry significant meanings and should be used with care. For example 'five' is negative whereas 'eight' means fortune and therefore is a lucky number.

Colours can also unbalance the unwary businessman. While red is generally a celebratory colour, writing to someone in red in a personal relationship can signify a parting. So beware, what is acceptable in one context may be inappropriate in another.

On the plus side, water, particularly if it is flowing represents financial prosperity and fish are seen as indicating a surplus or bounty. Also, certain days are seen as more auspicious than others, so consult your Chinese colleagues or friends when choosing contract signing days, or the opening of your new office.

"Chinese people are typically very patriotic and any questioning of the sovereignty of Tibet or Taiwan, is likely to generate a very vigorous debate with your host" says Ting.

"You can also expect some surprisingly personal questions about your family, age, and sometime even your salary. Take this as a compliment that your business contact is interested in understanding more about you as a potential friend. It's a good sign. Chinese business contacts are always keen to create



relationships with people not job titles.”

Understanding the cultural and social differences and respecting them will take you a long way as will a few Chinese phrases alongside having your business card translated into Chinese.

One final word of caution, although humour is a great ice breaker, it is really best avoided. The Chinese sense of humour is completely different. If you do decide to tell that howler you heard in the pub on Saturday night, your translator might simply say “you are being told a joke, laugh now” and your hosts will, heartily and incomprehensibly oblige.

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