

Belgium Cultural Etiquette



Meeting and Greeting

- Shake hands with everyone present -- men, women, and children -- at business and social meetings. Shake hands again when leaving.
- Repeat your name when being introduced.

Language

- Dutch, French and German are all widely spoken in Belgium.
- Speak English if in doubt. There is no place in Europe where you can get in greater trouble by using the incorrect language than in Belgium.
- The language of choice for negotiators in Brussels is English. French is also frequently used.

Body Language

- It is considered impolite to snap your fingers.
- Do not put your hands in your pockets, yawn, scratch or use toothpicks in public.
- Feet should never be put on chairs or tables.
- Back slapping is considered offensive.
- The "okay" sign means zero.

Corporate Culture

- Belgians take punctuality for business meetings very seriously. Call with an explanation if you are delayed.
- Present your business card upon meeting. Business cards in English are acceptable.
- Belgians tend to socialize for a short period of time before they get down to business at meetings.
- Initial meetings are generally for getting acquainted and developing trust.
- Business meetings are formal. Personal relationships follow business relationships.
- Belgians are known for compromise, negotiation and common sense. They appreciate clear facts and figures.

- In Flanders, business organization is generally horizontal and simple. Participatory management, active consensus and delegation of responsibility are common in the workplace.
- Walloons prefer structure, formal organization, clear hierarchical systems and directive leadership. Rules and procedures are important to Walloons, as are job titles and rank.
- It is not acceptable to call a Belgian businessperson at home unless there is an emergency.

Dining and Entertainment

- Business lunches are common; business breakfasts are rare.
- To beckon a waiter or waitress raise your hand and make eye contact.
- Keep your hands on the table at all times during a meal -- not in your lap. However, keep your elbows off the table.
- Accept any drink offered by your host. Don't ask for a drink not offered.
- Hosts seat guests. Husbands and wives are generally not seated together.
- Hosts and hostesses sit at opposite ends of the table.
- A male guest of honor is seated to the right of the hostess; a female guest of honor is seated to the right of the host.
- Wait to drink until your host offers the first toast.
- The guest of honor is generally expected to offer a toast.
- Belgians are thrifty and do not appreciate waste. Finish all the food on your plate.
- Knife and fork are placed side by side on the dinner plate at the 5:25 position when you are finished eating.
- It is considered impolite to ask for a tour of your host's home.

Dress

- Belgians dress conservatively.
- For business meetings, men should wear dark suits and ties. Women should wear suits, dresses or skirts and blouses.

Gifts

- Gifts are generally not exchanged in business settings.

- When invited to someone's home, always bring flowers for the hostess. Small gifts or candy for children are appreciated.
- Do not give chrysanthemums, which symbolize death.
- Gifts are generally opened in front of the giver.
- Don't give gifts that are extravagant or expensive.

Helpful Hints

- Avoid discussing personal matters or linguistic divisions with Belgians.
- In Belgium, men are expected to rise when a woman enters the room. They also stand on public transportation until women are seated.
- Do not flaunt wealth or be noisy or loud in public.
- Do not ask personal questions about private lives.
- Try to sneeze and blow your nose in private.

Especially for Women

- Foreign women should have little difficulty conducting business in Belgium.
- It is acceptable for a foreign woman to invite a Belgian man to dinner and pay the tab.

Resource: http://www.ediplomat.com/np/cultural_etiquette/ce_be.htm