

Germany Cultural Etiquette



Meeting and Greeting

- At a business or social meeting, shake hands with everyone present when arriving and leaving.
- When introducing yourself, never use your title. Introduce yourself by your last name only.
- Never shake hands with one hand in your pocket.

Names and Titles

- Use last names and appropriate titles until specifically invited by your German host or colleagues to use their first names.
- Titles are very important. Never use titles incorrectly and never fail to use them. If unsure, err in favor of a higher title.
- A Doctor can be either a medical doctor or a holder of a Ph.D.
- Two titles should not be used at the same time, except when addressing a letter to someone. If a person does hold several titles, the higher one is used in speaking to him/her.

Body Language

- Germans may appear reserved and unfriendly until you get to know them better.
- Never put your hands in your pockets when talking with someone.
- "Thumbs up" gesture means "one" or is a sign of appreciation or agreement.
- Making hands into two fists, thumbs tucked inside the other fingers and making pounding motion lightly on a surface expresses "good luck."
- Never use the "okay" sign (index finger and thumb jointed together to make a circle). This is considered a rude gesture.
- Don't point your index finger to your own head. This is an insult.

Corporate Culture

- Germans take punctuality for business meetings and social occasions seriously. Tardiness is viewed as thoughtless and rude. Call with an explanation if you are delayed.

- Send company profiles, personal profiles, etc., to German colleagues before your visit to establish credibility.
- Contacts are vital to a business success. Use a bank, German representative or the Industry and Handelskammer (Chamber of Industry and Commerce) when possible.
- Rank is very important in business. Never set up a meeting for a lower ranked company employee to meet with a higher ranked person.
- The primary purpose of a first meeting is to get to know one another and to evaluate the person, to gain trust, and to check chemistry.
- Meetings are often formal and scheduled weeks in advance.
- Germans generally discuss business after a few minutes of general discussion.
- Arrive at meetings well prepared. Avoid hard-sell tactics or surprise.
- Germans take business very seriously. Levity is not common in the workplace.
- Business cards in English are acceptable.
- Germans are competitive, ambitious and hard bargainers.
- Germans value their privacy. They tend to keep their office doors closed. Always knock on doors before entering.
- Objective criticism isn't given or received easily. Compliments are seldom given for work product.
- Strict vertical hierarchy exists. Power is held by a small number of people at the top. Deference is given to authority. Subordinates rarely contradict or criticize the boss publicly.
- Organization is logical, methodical and compartmentalized with procedures and routines done "by the book."
- Decision making is slow with thorough analysis of all facts.
- Germans are not comfortable handling the unexpected. Plans are cautious with fallback positions, contingency plans, and comprehensive action steps -- carried out to the letter.
- Germans produce massive written communications to elaborate on and confirm discussions.
- Written or spoken presentations should be specific, factual, technical and realistic.
- Reports, briefings and presentations should be backed up by facts, figures, tables and charts.
- Germans have an aversion to divergent opinions, but will negotiate and debate an issue fervently.
- Remain silent if the floor has not been given to you or if you are not prepared to make an informed contribution.

- Decisions are often debated informally and are generally made before meetings with compliance rather than consensus expected in the meeting.
- Always deliver information, products, proposals, etc., to clients on time.
- Do not call a German at home unless it is an emergency.

Dining and Entertainment

- To beckon a waiter, raise your hand and say, "Herr Ober." To beckon a waitress, raise your hand and say, "Fräulein."
- Business breakfasts are arranged, but more often a business lunch is preferred.
- Lunch with business colleagues generally involves social conversation. Do not discuss business during lunch or dinner unless your German host initiates the conversation.
- Business entertaining is usually done in restaurants.
- Spouses are generally not included in business dinners.
- Nobody drinks at a dinner party before the host has drunk. The host will raise his glass to the woman on his right and then toast to the health of the group. Thereafter, people may drink as they see fit.
- When toasting as a guest, hold the glass only at the stem, clink your glass with everyone near you at the table and say Prosit, then take a drink. Then look into the eyes of someone at your table and lift your glass just slightly, then bring your glass down to the table.
- Guten Appetit is said before eating and means "enjoy your meal". It is the host's way of saying, "please start". Guests can respond by saying Guten Appetit or Danke ebenfalls, which means, "thank you."
- A guest of honor is seated to the left of the hostess if it is a man and to the right of the host if it is a woman.
- Keep your hands on the table at all times during a meal -- not in your lap. However, take care to keep your elbows off the table.
- Use a knife and fork to eat sandwiches, fruit, and most food.
- Do not use a knife to cut potatoes or dumplings (suggests food is not tender). The general rule is whatever does not need a knife, should not be touched with your knife.
- Never cut fish with anything but a fish knife. If a fish knife is not offered, two forks are acceptable.
- Do not leave any food on your plate when you are finished eating.
- Do not smoke until after dinner is finished and coffee is served. Then ask permission.

- When finished eating, place knife and fork side by side on the plate at the 5:25 position.
- If you are taking a break during the meal, but would like to continue eating or would like more food, cross the knife and fork on your plate with the fork over the knife.
- Germans don't tend to stay long after dinner. The honored guests are expected to make the first move to leave.
- A "thank you" is usually done in person or with a telephone call.
- Do not ask for a tour of your host's home, it would be considered impolite.

Dress

- Being well and correctly dressed is very important.
- Casual or sloppy attire is frowned upon.
- For business, men should wear suits (dark colors) and ties. Women should wear dresses, suits, pantsuits, skirts and blouses.

Gifts

- Gifts are normally not exchanged at business meetings, but small gifts may be appropriate at the successful conclusion of negotiations.
- Give books, bourbon, whiskey or classical music. American-made gifts are very appropriate.
- Do not give pointed objects like knives, scissors, umbrellas (considered unlucky), personal items, extravagant gifts or wine (Germans are very proud of their wine cellars).
- When invited to someone's home, always bring a small gift for the hostess.
- For a large party, it is nice to send flowers before the party or the next day.
- Give an uneven number of flowers (unwrapped, not 13), yellow roses, tea roses or chocolates.
- Do not give red roses (love symbol) or carnations (mourning). Yellow and white chrysanthemums and calla lilies are given for funerals only.

Helpful Hints

- Germans are more formal and punctual than most of the world. They have prescribed roles and seldom step out of line.
- A man or younger person should always walk to the left side of a lady.

- Traditional good manners call for the man to walk in front of a woman when walking into a public place. This is a symbol of protection and of the man leading the woman. A man should open the door for a woman and allow her to walk into the building, at which time the woman will stop and wait for the man. The man should then proceed to lead the woman to her designation. If going to a restaurant, the man may relinquish his leadership role to the maitre' de.
- Don't be offended if someone corrects your behavior (i.e., taking jacket off in restaurant, parking in wrong spot, etc.). Policing each other is seen as a social duty.
- Compliment carefully and sparingly -- it may embarrass rather than please.
- Don't lose your temper publicly. This is viewed as uncouth and sign of weakness.
- Stand when an elder or higher ranked person enters the room.
- Don't shout or be loud, put your feet on furniture or chew gum in public.

Especially for Women

- Traditionally, there has been little acceptance of women in high positions of responsibility and power in business.
- Women, especially foreign women, must establish their position and ability immediately in order to conduct business successfully in Germany.
- A woman should not feel inhibited to invite a German man to dinner for business and will not have any problems paying.