

Doing Business in France

Canada has a positive image. Canada benefits from a very positive image in France. Canadians are perceived as more human in business relations than Americans. Quebec enjoys a romantic image and Québécois are always very welcome as long lost cousins coming back home. The French tend to view Canada as Quebec and often forget that Canadians may not speak French, and are North American in their lifestyle.

Remember, the French are patriotic. Foreign companies are often concerned by the protectionist attitudes in France. North American companies are more easily the targets of criticism, especially those that operate in sectors considered strategic. Canadians may be surprised by the range of sectors, such as paper manufacturing, that can be defined as strategic to justify some protection from imports or foreign investment. The media may be quick to latch onto a foreign company making redundancies, but buyers are not too influenced by 'buy French' arguments.

The ability to speak French is a must. Knowledge of languages is not very widespread. As a result, one must speak French to do business in France.

Personal relations are more formal than in Canada. The informal address *tu* and first names must be used with great caution. Judging when to start using these informal modes of address is an art that even French people find difficult. The best way to judge is to observe the way people talk to each other in a given environment. Inappropriate use of *tu* might irritate somebody who feels somehow superior or deserving of respect. It might also mislead French colleagues as they would take it as a special mark of affection and might be disappointed that it is not the case.

Another aspect of the formality of relations is the strong sense of hierarchy that prevails in most French companies. As a Canadian manager, keep in mind the restraint that staff have when talking to you. It is difficult to implement a true open door policy in a French firm.

Formality is also reflected in the way people greet each other. One must always greet people with a handshake. A manager arriving in the morning and crossing an office might have to shake the hands of 20 people before sitting down. If this is not done, employees will think the manager is either rude or cross.

Although colleagues can become personal friends, it will be a long time before French colleagues invite their Canadian counterparts to their homes. When they do, the invitation will be very formal. It is quite common for a first invitation to be to a restaurant, rather than the home, and foreigners should not interpret this as lack of friendliness.

But business relationships are less formal than in Canada. Surprisingly, although relations with people are generally formal, the contractual environment is rather casual. Oral agreements are perfectly valid and common practice. Even with written contracts if there is a problem, a solution will be sought outside court. When matters arrive before the court, the magistrates still encourage a settlement outside court.

Don't forget the French are individualistic. The French are not natural team players. The educational system is geared to promoting individual achievement and respect for hierarchy. This reflects the way management information and decision-making systems are devised in French companies. It can be very difficult for a Canadian newcomer to impose a North American consultative team practice.

The discipline of the 'bottom line' may be new to some French business managers. French companies tend to be much more product oriented than Canadian companies and tend to give less attention to financial control. For example, many Canadian companies are surprised to find out that their