

For these reasons, it is inappropriate to begin talking business immediately when first meeting with a Mexican counterpart. The first encounter will likely be over lunch or dinner. Be prepared for many questions about personal life, family and experiences in Mexico. The Mexican host will probably reciprocate with personal stories and anecdotes. This exchange can easily dominate a three-hour dinner, with little mention of business. The following morning would be an appropriate time to get down to business. As the relationship matures, less time will be needed to establish this level of comfort, and business discussions can start more quickly.

An invitation to a Mexican home is considered an honor and a sincere offer of friendship. This is not usually an appropriate forum to continue business discussions. Likewise, if Mexican associates visit Canada, inviting them home for dinner will be regarded as an important honor.

The Meaning of "Yes"

The Mexican use of the word "yes" is the source of much confusion in cross-cultural business relationships. "Yes" can mean "maybe" or even "no". This is an area where Mexican obsession with politeness and saving face can be counterproductive. Mexicans are very reluctant to offend anyone, especially someone they do not know well. So they will often say "yes" to a question to which they actual wish to say "no". Sometimes a "yes" or a positive reaction may reflect nothing more than polite optimism that never materializes into action. Misunderstandings can be costly and time consuming. Many Canadians have been disappointed to find that there is no follow up to an apparently successful sales trip to Mexico.

Canadians doing business in Mexico must learn to distinguish between a real "yes" and a polite "yes". The following are some basic techniques:

- Ask open-ended questions rather than "yes or no" questions. Judge the level of understanding by the substance of the reply.
- Ask questions frequently. If the discussion has gone too far, the Mexican participants may be embarrassed to admit that they don't understand some of the basic elements.
- Encourage a dialogue, even when making a presentation. This will help detect real interest and understanding.
- If it appears that the Mexican recipient does not understand an explanation, repeat it in a different way to avoid the suggestion of misunderstanding.
- If you receive indications of interest and willingness to proceed to the next stage, draft a series of next steps with your contact. Make action by the Mexican party, such as a fax to you in Canada, the first step. No action will indicate a lack of interest.
- Ask your Mexican contact to volunteer his or her own suggestions on how to structure the business strategy.