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How to avoid being left with egg foo yung on your face

By Thomas J. Knutson

The development of intercultural communication has had a profound impact on the American business community. As nations have moved closer to the notion of a "global village," American business people have experienced incredible increased involvement with their counterparts around the world.

The continuing growth of multinational business presents lucrative opportunities for American entrepreneurs and companies. But unfortunately, many of these opportunities are lost, as the following example demonstrates.

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Terry returned to her office in Sacramento after a two-week sales trip to Japan. She announced to her colleagues great success in obtaining two large orders from Japanese firms. Terry described her Tokyo meetings with enthusiasm. Without exception, the Japanese smiled and nodded approvingly during all of her presentations; they never displayed any resistance to her proposals.

As a result, Terry's boss organized a

party to celebrate the company's entrance to the Japanese market, press releases were distributed, and everyone looked forward to working closely with the Japanese and anticipated great profit. Terry was congratulated by both management and co-workers on her achievement.

Two months passed before Terry heard from the Japanese. Their letter stated that they were still analyzing the situation and that the order was not to be sent until further notice.

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This example illustrates a fundamental problem experienced by many Americans seeking to develop business abroad: they are ill-equipped to convince representatives from other cultures to accept their proposals. They fail to adapt their persuasive techniques to the host culture. Instead, they believe that the "American way" will work without adjusting their messages to the local norms and customs.

For example, only last week a Thai businessman evaluated the efforts of three American salespeople with the ob-

POINT OF VIEW



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He says American business people fail to adapt their sales approaches to suit foreign customers.

servation, "You Americans sure talk a lot." In a culture where "quiet" is frequently considered a virtue, the Americans had talked their way out of an order.

The wasted effort, money and time associated with the typical American's inability to cope with international business interaction represents a huge financial crisis and an even greater public relations disaster. Crucial mistakes occur all too frequently when U.S. business people engage in international commerce. Language problems, disre-

gard of national values and misinterpretation of cultural differences by American business people abroad frequently contribute to frustration, anger and even accusations of racism.

These feelings lead to damaged reputations and, ultimately, increased loss of money owing to lost business. Mistakes jeopardize millions of dollars in production, negotiations, purchases, sales and contracts.

To avoid these problems, U.S. business people must recognize that intercultural communication sensitivity is crucial to success in international business dealings. The development of training programs to help people adjust to conducting business with other cultures must be given the highest priority.

Preparation for international communication should focus on cultural differences in work-related values and behavioral norms, the reduction of anxiety associated with adjustment to a new cultural, improving communication skills with culturally different people, providing necessary management and communication skills, coping strategies

for dealing with "culture shock," and methods of continuing intercultural communication training.

Two studies completed recently at California State University, Sacramento, demonstrate the validity and benefit of intercultural training.

Doug Lipp studied the effect of intercultural training on Americans working in a U.S.-based Japanese corporation and found that such training virtually insured the success of employees sent to overseas assignments. Ulrich Lueneemann's research, "Intercultural Communication Training," developed a complete curriculum for use by international business people in preparation for foreign assignment.

Taken together, these two studies demonstrate that valid intercultural programs exist, that they are effective, and that they increase the probability of U.S. business success abroad.

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