

# JEANETTE S. MARTIN & LILLIAN H. CHANEY, Global Business Etiquette: A Guide to International Communication and Customs

Irina Averianova

With the world gradually turning into one big global village, and not just virtual any longer, it is not surprising that the number of people involved in international business is steadily increasing. The number of books, guides and manuals catering for the interests and needs of this growing nomadic community is also increasing. One of the most recent additions to this extensive list is *Global Business Etiquette: A Guide to International Communication and Customs*, yet another set of recommendations on how to behave correctly and respectfully in various business situations in the worldwide setting. It is always fascinating to follow how various contributors to this burgeoning segment of the book market tackle such an extremely diverse multi-ethnic world of clashing customs and practices and to investigate what systematic approach, if any, they choose in selecting and interpreting numerous business-related samples of intercultural communication. Thus, the well-known *Cross-Cultural Business Behavior* by R.R. Gesteland (Copenhagen Business School, 2002) follows the principle of the “Great Divide” between the world cultures on the criteria of Deal vs. Relationship, Informal vs. Formal, Rigid-time vs. Fluid-Time, and other business dichotomies. Another authoritative book *Rules of the Game* by N. Leaptrott (Thomson Executive Press, 1996) analyzes international business communication through the lenses of the culturally-defined ways people across the world perceive reality, i.e. tribal, pluralist, collective and mixed cultures. The book under review here follows yet another approach. Its nine chapters focus on such aspects of social culture, as travel customs, greetings and introductions, socializing, nonverbal behavior, dress and appearance, cultural attitudes and behaviors, dining, conversational customs, and oral and written communication. Each of the chapters ends with “Country-Specific Information”, which provides some additional tips on the topic for the top 10 countries with which the United States conducts most of its international trade: Canada, China, England, France, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, South Korea, and Taiwan. Since none of the subject areas mentioned above is only business-related, the book seems to be capable of attracting a more general, not just business or commerce studies, reader. Those interested in international communication may appreciate its brevity: such a breadth of multicultural information is covered in just 160 pages! The reader’s optimistic anticipation is reinforced by the introductory assertion: “What you should gain from this book is better understanding of who you are, the ability to find out about the person in the other culture, an increased sensitivity to other ways of thinking and being, an expansion of your communication skills, and a better understanding of global business relationships.”

“Better” is a comparative word here, so in assessing whether *Global Business Etiquette* is relevant to his or her needs, the reader must know what potential audience the authors have targeted in terms of national affiliation and level of intercultural competence. It would have been helpful if Martin and Chaney had stated right in the preface that their book is written for an American reader with little, if

any, experience of cross-cultural communication. Such an agenda becomes clear from the very first chapter “Travel Customs And Tips” where the authors instruct their readers on how to obtain a passport in the U.S., convert data to metric and Celsius temperature systems, and what to pack for travel. Presumably, only this kind of audience would need advice on business etiquette such as recommending not to give lingerie to a member of the opposite gender as a gift, to “touch members of the opposite gender only if they are related to you” when in Iraq, and to beware of making business presentations “wearing a suit with buttons missing, a stained tie, and scuffed shoes”. This kind of audience is also likely to appreciate primitive anecdotal stories, which illustrate most of the book’s intercultural observations and assertions and which at best can be categorized as “urban legends”, rather than the “academic information and examples” Martin and Chaney claim them to be. For instance, the discussion of various modes of space and touch in different cultures is supported by the story of an Italian who, while on training in the U.S., kept on squeezing females’ derrieres to indicate to the lady that she is attractive, a practice “very accepted in Italy”. Consider another “urban legend” quoted by the authors in support of the link between attire and credibility: one business man, named Larry, dressed in a T-shirt and “soiled sneakers” was “shocked and dismayed” when his supervisor denied him a meeting with important Japanese clients arriving “unexpectedly” (sic!) to close a multi-million-dollar deal on Larry’s project. Or imagine another, named Bob, who was not Jewish, but still was given the responsibility for arranging a Rosh Hashanah display of Jewish foods at a U.S. supermarket. The fact that he made a mess of the job is regarded by the authors a powerful proof of the need to know the special foods consumed in various countries during holidays and the special significance associated with these foods.

But even the most naïve and inexperienced readers will hardly benefit from such “insightful” remarks as “In Canada, hotel accommodations in the large cities are Western style” and “in the Netherlands, hotel accommodations are very Westernized”. It is difficult to believe that the authors assumed even novices in travel would envision igloos as hotels in minor cities of Canada or expect anything but the “Western” in the heart of Europe. And do their readers at all need to be told by Martin and Chaney that “in situations, in which people do not have a common language, the services of an interpreter may be needed”? And why do the authors decide to use this particular book with this particular reader to be the place where they advise foreigners to control or mask their body odors, perspiration and offensive breath “because U.S. persons respond negatively to body and breath odors”? What is the point of inserting a 3-page instruction to foreign students on how to adjust to the values of the U.S. educational system?

Lack of relevance and focus in general seems to be one of the weakest sides of *Global Business Etiquette*, as a large part of the book has little or nothing to do with business or with the countries the book focuses on. How relevant, for instance, is it for an entrepreneur to know, that in Japan, “young girls often walk hand in hand”, or that in Madagascar, “pregnant women are forbidden to eat brains or sit in doorways”? While it is important to know that the volume or speed of a person’s speech is perceived differently in different cultures, the comment on the accent by which the British and Americans make assumptions about a person’s educational background is hardly related to the subject matter of the book or its readers. Similarly, while being topic-relevant, the entry about specific clothes that Philippine men and women wear (*barong* and *terno*) is scarcely helpful for learning business

etiquette; neither is it clear why the national attire of this particular country was singled out, together with that of India and Egypt, to be described in detail, since none of these countries belongs to the group of top ten business partners of the U.S., specified at the beginning of the book.

The lack of focus is also responsible for the fact that while some important concepts are not sufficiently explained, others are tediously elaborated without any particular need for it. For example, the authors do not explain what is meant by the “internal and external cues”, which one needs to monitor in order “to be culturally sensitive”, or what those low- and high-context cultures are that place such a different importance on silence. On the other hand, an instruction on how to make special accent marks, or diacritics, in computer word processing hardly deserves any attention in a book on business etiquette. Similarly, the presentation of conversational taboos includes ‘witchcraft’, ‘jungle’, and ‘hut’ (topics highly unlikely to appear on the business talks schedule) when conversing with people from Nigeria (not a member of the book’s top-ten selected list), while ill-famous Tiananmen, Taiwan or Tibet are not mentioned for China, the country ranking second in this list. One realizes that the advice to not discuss politics, religion, or the failing economies of any country may ignite the protest of human rights watchdogs, but since the authors have stated this anyway, it would have been logical to extend this recommendation to any cross-cultural business interaction and not to limit it to Australia, New Zealand, and Latin America only. This is not, unfortunately, the only case in the book when international universals are baselessly thrust into the limits of a few selected countries or, on the contrary, some country-specific traits are presented as universally accepted behavior. For instance, the authors’ unconditional admonition against clinking glasses while toasting contradicts the customs of some countries, such as Russia, while the advice to toast with an empty glass if you don’t drink alcohol is hardly reasonable anywhere. In the book, women are recommended to pack a scarf to cover their heads if they intend to visit Islamic mosques and some Catholic churches, but neither Greek nor Russian Orthodox churches, traditionally strict in this respect, are mentioned. One would be surprised to learn that it is only in Latin America, Mediterranean and Africa, where “women who are close friends often hug and kiss each other as part of their greeting”. Eating with hands is presented as a possibility in Ghana and Kenya and not as typical of many Asian countries. And, on the contrary, the recommendation not to place feet on a desk is given only for Taiwan, when one would expect the writers of such publication to caution their American readers against this generally inappropriate behavior in any cultural setting.

The discussion on verbal interaction provides many examples of a conspicuous tendency of the book to attribute a lot of cross-cultural universals to the American culture alone. Thus, four common forms of verbal interaction (repartee, ritual conversation, argument, and self-disclosure) are presented as “preferred forms of interaction in the U.S.”. The question hence arises: “what forms of interaction do other cultures use?” Commenting on the varying amount of self-disclosure across cultures, the authors state that people in the U.S. “reveal little personal information during small talk”. One may wonder where people are eager to self-disclose under similar circumstances. The reader will also be amused to learn that most European countries enjoy humor “in addition (sic!) to the United States” or that “U.S. persons are considered masters of the art of small talk”. This is when the reader would definitely like to see “enough academic information” supporting the laurel so daringly taken away from the British.

Yet another serious problem of the book is lack of consistency, since the authors, while extensively quoting from various sources (e.g., 55 citations in a 10-page chapter), often lose a clear-cut position of their own. Promoting “increased sensitivity to other ways and customs” the authors choose to quote the following strategies of coping with a new culture during short visits: “Do not accept the host culture and continue to act as you would have in the home country. Make no effort to learn the language or customs of the host country”. This prohibitive statement about learning the language of the country you intend to visit contradicts their instructions “Learn as much of the language as possible before you go” or “Learn the common phrases in their language” elsewhere. A similarly blurred attitude is expressed towards humor: in the section about conversational humor, it is stated that “humor plays a central role in getting to know people of many cultures” while in the very next paragraph, belonging to the section on translation problems, the authors advise to avoid humor. It is particularly disturbing to see a faltering stand of the authors on the ethical question of bribery. Martin and Chaney seem to be lost in a moral dilemma: should Americans be involved in this practice “which is not approved of officially in any country” or not? On the one hand, they accept that bribery “is considered wrong in the United States”; on the other hand, the authors lament that the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act of 1977 “often puts U.S. firms at disadvantage when trying to compete with companies from cultures that have no problem with the practice of ‘gift giving,’ which U.S. persons would call a bribe”. To prove this “disadvantage” they quote “only two” (sic!) contracts lost over years by Hughes Space and Communications Company because Hughes failed to pay bribes. Moreover, this example of not exactly disadvantageous but highly ethical and legal integrity on the part of the company is further downplayed by the comment that, after all, Hughes is a market leader and can offer more than other competitors. Though not expressed overtly, such a view on bribery very unfavorably compares with the one of R. R. Gesteland (see above). In his book on cross-cultural business behavior, the author recalls problems of opening an office in Bangladesh, the country consistently quoted by Transparency International among the most corrupt in the world. Facing enormous bribes, which is the easiest way to deal with government agencies, his company “unwilling to engage in bribery ... shelved the idea of a Dhaka office”.

So, how “better” can we expect our understanding of intercultural communication and global business relationship to become after reading *Global Business Etiquette*? The undemanding, naïve and inexperienced readership might miss its weaknesses and probably heighten their cross-cultural awareness, having learned from this book that people in different countries often enjoy different ways of dressing, eating, communicating with each other, etc. Other more culturally aware readers, however, would have skipped the book and Martin and Chaney would have been spared their criticism, if the authors called their book “*Introduction to Global Business Etiquette*” or rather “*International Communication and Customs for Dummies*”. In such types of manuscripts, an anecdote is an anecdote and not “academic information”, and their breadth of coverage does not necessitate depth and accuracy.

Irina Averianova