

Cultural Daily

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From India to Italy: Food and Cross-Cultural Faux Pas

Ankit Gupta · Thursday, June 9th, 2016

I remember leaving my wife Ankita with a “not without you” look at the airport, but the deal I was going for was worth it. My first business trip to Italy was a dream come true. Not only was it an opportunity to land a potentially big client, but it was also a chance to see one of the most beautiful regions of Europe. It wasn't even a day around when I fell in love with the mystic countryside of the country, it seemed like every house had a personal vineyard to produce the national beverage relished at every supper. And the food, well, let's just say that being a fervid gourmet I was highly anticipating my first exposure to Mediterranean cuisine in the weeks leading up to departure. All the food I had a chance to experience was excellent. Yet it was also what led me to realize that I had a lot to learn about avoiding the cross-cultural business faux pas. For anyone new to business travel, the cross-cultural business faux pas represents, in a broad sense, any mistake a foreigner can make that might offend his or her hosts due to cultural differences. My introduction to the business faux pas was made possible by the differences in how Indians and Italians view eating.

Eating is more of a utilitarian process than anything else in India. In Italy, it is an event. They love to eat, and they love to spend a lot of time doing it. I was completely unprepared for a business meal that included several courses and consumed hours of my time. I was also unprepared for the reaction to my not eating enough.

Believe it or not, the sensibilities of Italians can be offended when their guests eat small portions. It comes down to their love of being hosts. If guests don't eat enough, they take it as an indication that the food is not good, their hospitality is unacceptable, or a combination of both.

Cross-Cultural Differences Not Personal

Previously, I had tried to explain the significant aspects of marketing to diverse cultures from a third-party, 'sitting in a chair in my office' perspective. I was no expert on the actual experience of cross-cultural interaction when I made that first trip to Italy. But I learned a very important lesson on that trip: cross-cultural differences are not personal, but they are important.

Being offensive to the cultural sensibilities of hosts could cost the business executive a major account or contract. It could insert friction into existing business relationships that have thus far remained strong. Being offensive could even cause customers and vendors to turn on you.

Avoiding cross-cultural faux pas takes a little research before travelling. Getting to know the host country and any regional peculiarities, when necessary, can save the business traveller a lot of embarrassment and discomfort.

Major Areas of Concern

Global business travel involves plenty of interaction between guest and host. In almost every case, interactions are confined to the office, restaurants, hotel lobbies and special events the host may decide to treat guests to. The limited scope of interaction, in my opinion, makes it relatively easy to identify the areas of most concern.

Those areas are:

- Alcohol Consumption - Alcohol consumption is one of the biggest. For example, not drinking vodka in Russia would be considered unacceptable while any alcohol consumption in the presence of Muslim hosts would be offensive.
- Dietary Restrictions - Like alcohol, dietary restrictions should be adhered to. Many of these restrictions are related to regional religious practice and/or religious holidays.
- Body Language - Body language, facial expressions, and gestures communicate quite a lot. It's important to know if there are any specific things to avoid in the country you plan to visit. For example, throughout most of Africa and the Middle East, people are expected to greet one another using the right hand; the left hand is considered unclean.
- Clothing - What you wear can be offensive in some cultures. Furthermore, little things like removing your shoes before entering a home in Asia can be important as well.
- Personal Space - The amount of space maintained between you and your host varies from one country to the next. Westerners, especially Americans, prefer much greater distances between people while Asian and Middle Eastern people prefer to be closer together.

I first learned about the cross-cultural business faux pas by not fully participating in the evening meals with my Italian hosts. I will not make that mistake again. Furthermore, I always do my research before travelling to a region I have not yet had an opportunity to experience. My goal is to avoid any future faux pas that might compromise business relationships. You might want to do the same if you frequently travel for business.

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