

# Think globally, act locally AND think again... Not all Austrians yodel

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Doing business and doing it well is challenging to begin with, but widening your company's footprint and breaking into new markets is a whole different story.

It's almost like starting from scratch, but with a twist. It really is and that is where the biggest mistakes happen. Some companies think that they can just use their proven "template" and apply it to other markets.

I have worked in Europe for half of a lifetime and then another half here in the US. While there are some similarities in the way we do business, the differences are vast and ignoring them can have devastating effects.

To start with, Europe is not as uniform as the US. Don't get me wrong, selling in the Midwest area of the US is vastly different than selling in the Tri-state, New York area. Having done both, it's important to understand that in New York you literally have a minute (ever wonder how the "New York minute" came about?) to get your point across while in the Midwest people are a bit more patient.

Europe, on the other hand, not only has a large number of different countries, it also has greatly different languages. Within those countries there are also social and linguistic nuances, and prejudices that are older than the history of the US, coupled with a desire to stay authentic.

Below are some tips on how to be successful when venturing abroad or communicating with internal, international audiences.

## Don't think you can go it alone

The biggest mistake would be to think that you can do business in another region without local presence or, at least advice. Hire a local business person within your industry and ask that person for advice on what to do and what NOT to do. Once you have that person on board, take their advice, understand and adjust to the cultural differences.

## Geography alone doesn't tell the whole story

My home country, Austria, is located in the eastern central part of Europe, but don't make the mistake to think that we are Eastern Europeans. We are by any means of the definition culturally situated in the West because of our history. A big American company made the mistake of dividing Europe by geography and put Austria in the Eastern region (along with

the Czech Republic, Hungary, Croatia, Bulgaria, etc. - all countries with emerging economies) instead of aligning it with Germany, Italy and Switzerland, where Austria has not only traditionally been part of but also has close economic ties.

The results were pretty devastating. The very successful Austrian management team resented the change and it was difficult to manage Austria within a region where there was no history of an open market economy until the Iron Curtain came down in 1989. Big mistake!

## **Try to understand the way business is done**

Go easy on the PowerPoint and have a cappuccino instead. Many of my friends in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, France and Italy tell me that to this day, business is done by building relationships, taking prospects and clients out, drinking and eating. While we here in the US still enjoy meeting client contacts in-person, it's no longer essential to the success of a company.

I have done business with clients that I didn't meet until year three into the engagement, something that is still rare in Europe. Wining and dining are still essential ingredients to being successful in many markets. And so, if you do not or someone you hire doesn't embrace that concept, it will be hard to build trust.

## **English is standard, but watch out for communication style differences**

Of course, English is the universal language and most companies that want to do business internationally will hire people who speak English quite well. That doesn't mean that they can master all the facets of the language. Be careful in the way you communicate and make sure that what you are trying to say is something that is properly understood by your counterpart.

Avoid idioms and explain your proposition in more than one way. I have sat in on many meetings with international companies and sometimes people try to translate certain terminology in a way where it doesn't make sense in the other language. This can lead to confusion and mismanaged expectations

## **Be patient, and then, be patient again!**

In the US, we are used to getting things done in a very timely manner. Either we like something and find that it makes sense or we don't and then we are on to the next thing. In Europe, people are not used to doing business that way. There is a lot more collaboration, consideration and weighing of the facts. This will lead to the process taking longer, with more meetings and decision-making points. Very seldom will you walk away from a meeting with clear action points, but if you read the buying signs correctly (and culturally correctly as well) and you are patient, it will pay off. It might take a few more lunches, dinners or drinks, but then, who's counting?

## **Understand traditions and heritage**

Coming late to a meeting in Germany or Austria is really rather unacceptable. In Italy you will probably not leave a bad impression, only if you are late and a bad dresser, too! Don't make the mistake to think that Germany, Austria and Switzerland have a lot in common just because we all speak German (at least in parts of Switzerland). While there are many similarities, the differences run deep and some animosities do as well. European countries are very proud of their heritage, their food and their traditions. When you make references, be sure that you really know what you are referring to. Austrians don't yodel (as a matter of fact, most of us have never heard of, least of all watched *The Sound of Music*) and not all Germans are rigid.

In closing, my strongest suggestion is to keep an open mind and to not stereotype. Like in every sales situation, it's best to observe, learn, ask questions, adjust and most importantly to listen. Humility goes a long way, especially when dealing with a different culture. Nobody likes to think that they are inferior and the best success can be achieved when we embrace rather than judge.

## ABOUT MONIKA D'AGOSTINO

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