



Dr. Fastener: Building Relationships with U.S. Companies

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Introduction

This is a subject that is as unique as the individuals and companies that are trying to build a relationship. Every country has its own cultural biases that influence to a great degree the success one doing business and forging relationships there will have. It comes as no surprise that statesmen will make great efforts to be schooled ahead of time in a country's culture before making an important visit. No one wants to repeat the mistakes of individuals like John F. Kennedy who announced in German to the people of Berlin that he was a "jelly doughnut" or Michele Obama who gave the Queen of England a warm hug breaking the long-standing British protocol that the Queen in not to be touched beyond a polite handshake.

As such, even though understanding the culture is a good start, there is no single equation that foreign companies can follow to guarantee a successful relationship with U.S. companies. Quite simply, companies must work hard and do their best to navigate each specific relationship. However, there is some advice that I can provide that might be helpful to any company seeking to establish and maintain a long-term relationship with a U.S. company.

Q1: Is doing business in the U.S. different than doing business in other countries?

A: Of course there are some unique aspects to doing business in the U.S. just as there are unique aspects for working in any country. However, there are many things, often simple human tendencies, that are universally true and blind to borders. For example, universally people want to be liked and respected and companies want their products to be valued and appreciated.

Q2: What would you say is the number one key to success in building a relationship with a U.S. Company?

A: Americans conduct business based on trust. **Even if you had the best product in the world and the absolute best solution for a specific customer, you should not expect to "make the sale" until a trust relationship**

has been developed. There is one exception to this, when your reputation precedes you and establishes your credibility. In these cases the party you would like to form a relationship with will actually seek you out. For example, someone wishing to purchase a luxury automobile probably needs no introduction to Rolls Royce. However, in new business relationships within the fastener industry this would clearly be the exception rather than the rule.

Q3: What does it take to build trust?

A: Americans will only build that trust through relationship. This means that one trying to get into a new account must be prepared to spend the time and resources necessary to build the relationship. **Americans tend to be very wary of companies and products they do not know.** Perhaps this goes back to the days of the nineteenth century when one had to be wary of the claims of the patent medicine or snake oil salesman, or perhaps a more contemporary reaction to the telemarketer. Whatever the reason, getting an audience with a customer can often be challenging. Therefore, when one does, **they must be prepared to clearly and effectively demonstrate why their product or service provides value.**

Q4: How committed are U.S. customers to their suppliers?

A: In general, once a relationship has stood the trials of time, American customers will usually be loyal to their suppliers. However, American relationships, especially newer ones, can also be fickle. As an example, unlike some cultures who invest years in building relationships and will stand close-by a supplier experiencing problems, U.S. customers often abandon new suppliers at the first hint of trouble.



Q5: How should individuals approach Americans in a business relationship?

A: Americans appreciate “likeability”. A relationship that is challenging because of language barriers, lack of common interests, or an aggressive or strong personality, will, at best, be slow to start and, at worst, never get off the ground. It’s not that Americans are unfriendly or particularly disrespectful of others, it’s just that they like individuals that convey a sincere “likeability”. Salesmen and those representing your company to the customer should, therefore, be chosen wisely and with care, especially if they are not a resident American. I would like to stress here that this is not about being American or non-American. In my experience, I have often accompanied European colleagues as they visit U.S. companies. Typically these meetings have been a smashing success, and, my foreign colleagues actually receive a better reception than their U.S. counterparts would have just because they are perceived to have special insight AND they are very likeable and engaging. Although it may not be inappropriate to invite the individual you are meeting with for a meal, do not be disappointed if they politely decline. Most relationships are developed over time and it may take several meetings before an individual is ready to take the relationship to a higher level.

Q6: If a fastener company is trying to develop new customers, how likely are they to get a friendly reception when they first meet with the potential new customer?

A: If the first meeting was at the customer’s invitation and they have a problem which you can solve, the first meeting will probably be productive. However, it is important to remember that fasteners are often given very little consideration. Fasteners are considered hardware and often the amount of technology or innovation they may possess is simply taken for granted. As such, many organizations do not invest significant resources in supporting this product and engineering and purchasing responsibilities are often given to the newest and least experienced members of their team.

Q7: What are some important things to consider in the first meeting?

A: **Americans appreciate timeliness.** Although they do not take this to the degree that some cultures do, showing up late to a meeting is viewed as disrespectful. Unfortunately, it is not always a two way street, and I know of many occasions where a salesman has had to wait long periods in the lobby only to receive a couple of minutes time of the person they came to visit. Dress should be professional and habits like smoking or chewing gum should normally be avoided. At some customers, meeting space is at a premium and meeting rooms are scheduled down to the minute. As such, do not go over the allotted time you have been given and quickly vacate meeting rooms after your time is up.

Q8: How do you engage an American business person?

A: Americans generally appreciate a little “light talk” at the beginning of a meeting. It is not uncommon to discuss the activities of one’s children, upcoming vacation plans, the local sports team, a hobby, etc. It is important, though to transition to the purposed business discussion within a few minutes. Normally the individual or group being visited will lay out the “guidelines” at

the start of a meeting and provide an idea of how much time they have. If they say, “I’m really busy this morning”, that should be taken as a cue to hit your highpoints quickly. This same general practice occurs in group meetings, with small talk occurring while everyone is gathering, but as soon as the group has assembled or the meeting start time has arrived, the meeting is expected to start promptly and end at the allotted time.

Q9: Once a relationship is established, what are some important things to make it a long-term relationship?

A: First of all, you should be easy to work with. One of the logistical problems of working with foreign entities are time differentials and language barriers. Systems should be established that allow provide your U.S. customers with access to your organization at times that coincide with U.S. business hours. Likewise, **you should have more than one individual that is proficient in English available at all times to speak with U.S. customers.** There is nothing more frustrating to a customer than being unable to reach a vendor when they want or when time is of the essence. I recall an occasion many years ago when I needed to contact a foreign customer with a question. I called, asked for my contact, and was forwarded to their office phone. They were not in and the phone call was forwarded again to an individual, perhaps a colleague, who did not speak much English. After several strained minutes of trying to explain the purpose of my call, this individual hung up the phone on me. Although I don’t think this individual was intending to be rude, I remember this poignant moment like yesterday, and was completely disappointed in this company. Therefore, in addition to having the right communication channels in-place, companies should be flexible to customer requests, responsive (especially important where there are time zone differences that span more than a few hours), do not get defensive (be open-minded and own problems when they are yours to own), understand U.S. compliance and regulatory issues, be fair with pricing and associated commercial matters, and be able to accommodate customer requests for documents like PPAPs, test reports, and certificates of compliance.

Q10: How might a company accelerate the relationship building process?

A: My best advice on this would be to obtain some local help. This could be in the form of hiring a local representative or even purchasing an already existing company. Any actions that would give you access to your customers with knowledgeable local individuals will help accelerate the process.

Summary

Many things must work together for a foreign company to be successful doing business in the U.S. However, U.S. businesses are usually quite open and willing to establish these relationships. Hopefully some of the answers to the above questions will help companies seeking to establish long-term relationships with U.S. Companies some insight into how to go about it. ■

