

Brazil: Cultural Tips

Brazilians conduct business only through personal connections. There must also be an implicit understanding that the business relationship will be long-term.

Before putting the resources into a trip, hire a Brazilian contact in your industry that can help you make the right connections. You can find such a person [known in Portuguese as a 'despachante'] through the U.S. Department of Commerce, the American Chamber of Commerce in Brazil, or an international organization to which you may already belong. A despachante is someone that will unravel the paperwork gridlock, not help you with setting up meetings. For that you should look for the chamber of commerce or consultants that specialize in this type of business. Trade shows are very good 'feel' for the country's business environment.

Make appointments of any kind at least two weeks in advance. Showing up at an office without an appointment is unacceptable in Brazilian business culture. This is especially true if the person you are there to see is a director of higher position.

Generally, the best times to schedule appointments are between 10:00 a.m. and noon, and 3:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m.

Give yourself two to three hours between each meeting, rather than scheduling your appointments 'back to back.' One exception is if you are in a central location and people will be coming to see you.

Avoid scheduling any appointments around 'Carnival', which precedes Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent.

'Official' business hours are 8:30 a.m.- 5:30 p.m. Higher- ranking individuals, particularly those with decision-making capacities, usually begin work later in the morning and stay later in the evening.

Poor punctuality is characteristic of Brazilian business culture. You will have to accept that waiting around for your Brazilian counterparts will be part of doing business here. Also, traffic in the main cities is chaotic and most of the time is responsible for the delays.

Business travellers should still make the effort to be punctual. You may want to bring some work or another diversion to fill the time while you wait.

Always arrive on time for a business meal or meeting at a restaurant. Usually, Brazilian business protocol demands punctuality on these occasions.

To feel comfortable in Brazil's sweltering, tropical climate, wear clothing made of light materials and colours that will help keep you cool. Light cottons and similar natural fibres are usually reliable choices.

Keep in mind that the seasons in Brazil are opposite to those in North America; June/July and August is winter and December/January/February is summer.

Appearance is vital in any business culture, however in Brazil the subtle differences are more acceptable; for instance you may wear jeans and a nice shirt and blazer to a meeting and be totally accepted. In Brazil there is a lot more fashion trends in business attire than in the US.

If you are wearing a three-piece suit in winter it is fashionable, but not in summer. Most Brazilian suits, unlike those made in the US, are tailor made and that is what distinguishes your position. One distinguishing factor is if the materials in your suit are local or imported.

Men should wear dark suits in black, charcoal grey, or navy blue. Again depending on the industry, light colours in the summer months are acceptable. Dark is better if you are travelling because it hides any dirt better.

Select ties that are well made and conservative. There is easy access to imported silk ties, but they are not conservative. They can be very flashy.

Ensure that your shoes are polished and kept in excellent condition. Or if you want to--depending on the industry--you can wear sandals or tennis shoes.

Wardrobe options for women include conservative dresses, suits, pantsuits, skirts, and blouses. While you should dress conservatively, strive for an elegant, rather than 'frumpish', appearance.

Women's nails should be well cared for. Makeup is not a strong feature among Brazilian women, who lean towards the natural look.

On occasions for business entertaining, dark suits for men are the appropriate formal wear.

On occasions for business entertaining, elegant dresses or skirts and blouses are appropriate formal wear for women. That famous 'little black dress' is perfect on all occasions.

The colours of the Brazilian flag are green and yellow. Wearing this colour combination will only make you an object of ridicule. Or, on the other hand, you can say it is an homage, which will be very well accepted.

Even if you're just taking a walk through the streets or shopping, be sure to dress well. Khakis or other pants and an attractive long-sleeved shirt are acceptable for men; women should wear a nice pair of pants or a skirt.

Maintain steady eye contact at all times; it is considered impolite to break eye contact.

People stand closely in front of each other, even when talking. Brazilians are a gregarious people and as such they like proximity, but they have knowledge of the customs of other countries.

Brazilians tend to be very fast talkers; expect any conversation to be fast-paced. It just seems faster; it is the same if you are talking to a foreigner.

It is normal for a conversation to be highly animated, with frequent interruptions, exclamations of 'no!', and a tremendous amount of physical contact. This is very true, as they really do listen and not pretend to listen.

Don't be alarmed if some of the interjections sound confrontational; this is simply a good-natured way of expressing interest in what is being discussed.

Attempting to direct or monopolize a conversation is frowned upon.

The language of this country is Portuguese. Make an effort to learn different words and phrases--don't worry about making mistakes. Brazilians will appreciate your efforts even if your vocabulary is limited.

Although Brazilians are very reticent about their own personal lives, they may nevertheless ask intrusive questions about your income, religion, and marital status. If you don't want to reveal this information, remain polite but give a vague, indirect, answer.

Brazilians also consider themselves Americans. Consequently, don't use the phrase 'in America' when referring to the United States.

Welcome topics of conversation include your travels, food, dance and the arts and football.

Topics to avoid include: ethnic and/or class differences. [Depending on the environment, class differences are more prone to discrimination than race.]; politics. [Again it depends on how it is discussed or approached. Brazil has been a democracy since 1989.]; Argentina, Brazil's main rival. [Only if you are discussing soccer, but Argentina is one of Brazil's great business partners in Mercosur.]; criticizing any aspect of Brazil. [Again as long as it is constructive there is no problem.]; personal questions--particularly those regarding family, income, and status in the workplace. [Brazilians are very personal and gregarious but they are very tactful, and may ask certain aspects of these topics as a mere comparison and as a means to better understand you.

In Brazil, people quickly move to a first-name basis. Do not, however, use first names until you are invited to do so.

Addressing a Brazilian by his or her first name is not necessarily a sign of familiarity. Here, family names are simply not used as much as in other countries.

Always address your Brazilian contact by title. Doctor is a well-used title, even if you don't have a doctoral degree. It is a sign of respect to call someone a doctor.

If you are having difficulties with a person's name, you may inquire about the correct pronunciation. Don't try to guess.

Professional titles such as "Doctor" and "Professor" should be used to address business acquaintances.

For those without professional titles, the term "Senhor" ["Mister"] or "Senhora" ["Mrs."] is used to precede the surname.

Brazilians will sometimes introduce themselves using their titles and their first names [i.e. Doctor George]. You'll observe that Brazilians will not always wish to be addressed by their last names.

Titles such as "Senhor" and "Doctor" can be added to first names in Brazil. You will probably find that your Brazilian counterpart prefers to be addressed by his/her first name on all occasions. For example, a lawyer whose name is Carlos da Silva may be "Dr. Carlos" to his juniors and "Carlos" to his equals. Often, before handing you a business card, a Brazilian will underline one name [indicating "Call me this"] and cross off a title [indicating "Don't call me that"]. So, if you are handed a card written "Dr. Carlos da Silva" with the "Carlos" underlined and the "Dr." crossed off, that means "Call me Carlos."

In Brazil, people usually have two surnames. In writing, the mother's surname comes before the father's surname. It is appropriate, however, to address people using the father's surname.

Giving a gift is not necessary during a first meeting. Instead, offer to buy lunch or dinner and use this opportunity to learn more about the recipient's tastes. This way, when the appropriate time comes to present a gift, you'll be able to make more of an informed choice.

A relaxed social situation is the best time to present a gift.

Do not give anything that is obviously expensive. Your generosity will only cause embarrassment or be misinterpreted as a bribe.

Small electronic items are often appreciated gifts. Good choices include scientific calculators, electronic address books and day-timers, pocket CD players, and pocket radios.

Tapes and CDs of popular U.S. entertainers make prized gifts.

Inexpensive cameras and name-brand pens can also be good choices.

When invited to a home bring candy, a fine wine, champagne, or scotch.

Bring small gifts for any children who may be present. Good choices can include U.S. University and sports team T-shirts.

Avoid giving gift items in black or purple, since these are the colours of mourning. Moreover, handkerchiefs are also associated with funerals.

Gifts of knives, scissors, or letter openers are interpreted as the severing of a close bond.

Avoid practical gifts, since they may be perceived as too personal. For example, do not give items such as wallets, key chains, ties, sunglasses, jewellery, and perfume.

Portuguese is the dominant language in Brazil. Be aware that Brazilians do not perceive themselves as Hispanics, and will only take offence if addressed in Spanish. But if you do speak Spanish you may ask to speak it, and they will accept it better.

In Brazilian business culture, English is widely spoken.

Women business travellers will have few problems dealing with male colleagues in Brazil.

Be aware that it will probably take several trips to bring the negotiations to a satisfactory conclusion.

Changing your negotiating team can jeopardize the entire contract and is a major breach of Brazilian business protocol. Moreover, you will have to emphasize that you value people and relationships over business.

Keep in mind that one common criticism Brazilians have of Americans is that they “leap right into business” before making the effort to build a personal relationship. They may also perceive Americans as arrogant.

Bring a plentiful supply of business cards, since Brazilians tend to be very keen about exchanging them.

Ensure that your business cards, promotional and presentation materials, or any other documents required in your dealings are printed in both Portuguese and English.

Within 24 hours, you can have your business cards printed/translated at various establishments in Brazil.

Knock on office doors, but after knocking, follow Brazilian business protocol by standing back and waiting. Many offices, however, are becoming more informal.

With the exception of Sao Paulo, Brazilian business culture generally has a slow pace and an informal atmosphere. Expect an air of formality, however, during initial meetings.

An important part of Brazilian business protocol is to begin a meeting with good-natured “small talk.” Delving immediately into business will only cause annoyance.

Generally, Brazilians are open to discussing a wide range of subjects, particularly in a business context. They tend to be very reticent, however, about discussing their private lives.

Private offices, even for senior executives, are not as common in Brazil. Consequently, be prepared for frequent interruptions during meetings.

Brazilians are generally analytical, abstract thinkers. Moreover, they will often look at the particulars of each situation, rather than seek guidance from a set of laws or rules.

Empirical and other factual evidence will be considered, but usually only if this kind of information suits the purposes of the negotiator on the Brazilian side. Subjective feelings almost always prevail in problem solving and decision-making. So be prepared to deal with this

If your Brazilian counterparts have reservations about you, this attitude will not be overcome by presenting them with impressive charts, graphs, or other empirical data. Instead, you will have to effectively use your personality, cultural awareness, and other interpersonal skills to win your Brazilian counterparts over to your side.

Good visuals are considered an important part of any presentation.

During negotiations, avoid confrontations and mask frustrations of any kind.

Placing an emphasis on increased power and status, rather than money, is sometimes an effective negotiating strategy.

Be prepared to discuss all aspects of the contract at once rather than methodically, "point-by-point."

Information that may seem irrelevant will often be reviewed over and over again.

Make sure you have a local accountant [contador, who will be aware of the financial laws and regulations], "notario" [is a notary], or an international lawyer on hand for all contract issues. Brazilians will only resent an "outside" legal presence.

Brazilians use periods to punctuate thousands; commas are used to delineate fractions.

Never leave as soon as a meeting is over. This action will only insult your colleagues and leave them with the impression that you think that you have more important things to do. Unless, however, you tell them at the beginning what your schedule is and how much time you have. That is why if the meeting is important to you, do not make other appointments that day.

Brazilian business culture is intensely hierarchical; only the highest person in authority makes the final decision.

Usually, documents aren't signed immediately after an agreement is reached; a handshake and a person's word are considered sufficient. The necessary papers will be prepared and signed later.

In the various subcultures of Brazil, a written agreement may not be considered binding and, consequently, can be subject to change.

Class [in economic terms] and status are a major influence in this society and often determine the type of job a person will have. The assumption that the powerful are entitled to special privileges, however, is starting to be questioned.

Business entertaining is conducted over lunch or dinner. Breakfast meetings are now becoming more popular in certain industries since it is better to meet before you get to work.

Set aside at least two hours for a business lunch, and a minimum of three hours for a business dinner.

Brazilian dinners take place any time between 7:00 to 10:00 p.m. Dinner parties often continue until 2:00 a.m.--sometimes until 7:00 a.m.!

Parties are usually held in clubs, rather than private homes. It's permissible to arrive 15 minutes after the "official" time for these occasions.

If you are invited to a social dinner, you may arrive 30 minutes late. For a business dinner, however, you are expected to arrive on time.

If possible, stay in a first-class hotel; if your hotel has an exceptional restaurant, do all of your business entertaining there. Otherwise, another safe option is to ask your guest's secretary to recommend a prestigious restaurant. In any case, ensure that you entertain at only the very best establishments.

Most restaurants will add 10% to the bill; leave another 5% for the tip.

At any gathering, follow Brazilian business etiquette and shake hands with everyone in your company, both upon arrival and upon departure.

If you are invited to a Brazilian home, consider it a rare honour.

Orchids are a very classy gift and most of the time they are of purple colour. Use good sense.

The formalities of dining are closely followed in Brazilian business culture.

Your Brazilian contact will usually sit at the head of the table. You may be seated to his or her immediate right. When you are the host, give the most important seat--at the head of the table--to your highest-ranking Brazilian contact.

If you are toasted, ensure that you raise your glass and propose a toast in return. Be sure to drink after the toast is made, before putting your glass down on the table. If you do not drink after the toast is made, it may be perceived that you do not care for the toast wish.

Never touch food with your fingers, as Brazilians consider this rude.

Cut all foods--including fruit and sandwiches--with your knife.

Don't use your fork to cut, even if the food item is exceptionally tender.

After you have cut your food, position your knife so that the tip of the blade is resting on the plate and the handle is lying on the table. Then use your fork to eat.

To indicate that you have finished your meal, place the fork horizontally across your plate with the fork tines up.

During meals, "small talk" is welcome. Business may be discussed at the conclusion of the meal, when coffee is served; wait for your Brazilian dining companions to bring up this subject.

After an evening at a Brazilian home, send the hostess flowers and a thank-you note on the following day.

Portuguese is the dominant language in Brazil. Be aware that Brazilians do not perceive themselves as Hispanics, and will only take offence if addressed in Spanish.

Brazilians tend to stand very close to each other.

Brazilians usually greet each other with long handshakes and noticeable eye contact; close friends will often embrace.

Hugging and backslapping are common among Brazilians, but they will usually refrain from using these gestures with foreigners, who may not be as receptive to this kind of contact.

Women will often greet each other by touching cheek to cheek, then kissing the air.

Women will often kiss each other by alternating cheeks--twice if they are married and three times if they are single.

Frequent touching of the arms, hands, or shoulders will occur during the course of a conversation.

Maintain a soft-spoken manner.

Say "oi" for "hello" and "tchau" for goodbye.

Brazilians often snap their fingers while flailing their hands up and down to add emphasis to a statement or indicate that something occurred "long ago."

Pulling at one's earlobe is a sign of appreciation.

Flicking the fingertips underneath the chin indicates that you don't know or understand the answer to a question.

To beckon someone, extend your palm face down and wave your fingers toward your body.

The "O.K." sign [using your first finger and thumb to form a circle] is considered vulgar.

When things are going well, it's acceptable to use the "thumbs up" sign.

Yawning or stretching in public is frowned upon.

Smoking is illegal in most public places.

People do not eat on the street or on public transportation.

Don't push or shove people in line-ups--even if others are doing so.

Be careful when crossing the street, since traffic is chaotic and extremely fast.

Machismo in Brazil takes a milder, more subtle form than in other Latin American countries. Moreover, it's important for men to appear self-assured and "in control" at all times.