

German: Cultural Tips

Never underestimate the importance of punctuality in German business culture. Arriving even five to ten minutes later than the appointed time is perceived as late, especially if you are a subordinate. Fifteen minutes would be considered a very serious faux pas and could mean a shaky start to any potential business relations.

Be prepared to make an appointment for most things. Germans don't usually feel comfortable discussing especially serious things "on the go", so don't expect to be able to just drop into the office unannounced for any detailed discussions. Make your appointments well in advance. [Making appointments for a more detailed telephone conversation is also not unusual]. Give at least one or two weeks notice for an appointment made by telephone; allow at least a month for an appointment made by mail. If you don't have much preparation time, it's sometimes possible to arrange for a brief, introductory meeting within a few days' notice.

If you must be late for any reason, it's important that you call and notify the person who is expecting you. Moreover, you should give a plausible explanation for the delay.

The preferred times for business appointments are between 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. or between 3:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m.

Avoid scheduling appointments on Friday afternoons, as some offices close by 2:00 p.m. or 3:00 p.m. on Fridays.

Casually changing the time and place of an appointment is not appreciated. Allow for at least 24 hrs, if you can, to change or cancel appointments. Be prepared to offer a plausible explanation.

Be sensitive to vacation and festival periods here. Germans generally have six weeks of paid vacation, which means someone is almost always "in Urlaub" ["on holiday"]. Therefore, be prepared to take this into consideration when making appointments or planning visits. For instance, Germans commonly take long vacations during July, August, December and Easter, when schools break.

Dress in corporate business and banking is generally formal, dark and conservative suits for both men and women. Otherwise, business dress is relatively casual. Suits are seldom worn by clerks and other office staff, and are standard dress for only managers at the upper levels. In banks, men tend to be more formally dressed than their female co-workers, often attired in suit and tie. Dress codes in the IT sector are very casual.

Khakis with a simple jacket/blazer would be inappropriate, especially for first meetings or contacts.

Germans tend to dress in more conservative, muted colours, both in business and social environments. You will notice, too, in both social situations and on a daily basis that Germans tend to "dress up" much more than, for example, North Americans when they go out. This goes as much for walking the dog or shopping at the supermarket as for going to restaurants and cafes. In other words, very casual sporting attire is seen on mostly teenagers and students, or is otherwise reserved for the gym or beach. Dress shoes worn with jeans and a tastefully coordinated ensemble is quite normal for adult men and women.

Women should also avoid excessively ornate jewellery or displaying items of conspicuous wealth, especially in the former East Germany. The standard of living in this area of Germany is still lower than that in the western part and displays of affluence can cause resentment.

When you receive an invitation stating "informal" dress, don't assume you'll be welcome arriving in a T-shirt and sweatpants. For a social gathering, informal more often than not means tastefully coordinated clothes, although not necessarily a jacket and tie for men. An invitation stating "formal" dress usually means formal eveningwear, which is very dressy by American standards.

Most restaurants do not require a tie for men, although the upscale establishments expect both men and women to arrive well dressed. [Important related side note: Patrons of restaurants are normally free to select their own tables and seat themselves. In very upscale establishments, however, guests will more likely to be shown to their seats.]

“Small talk” with strangers does not have a significant social function in German culture as it does in very relationship-oriented cultures [e.g. Mediterranean, South American, African, Middle Eastern countries] or the large immigration countries. In especially the latter cases, small talk and the art of conversation with strangers evolved out of a need to bridge considerable physical, cultural, and therefore psychological distance between individuals. Communities therefore grew from relationships built on common interests and needs [i.e. “Settlement community”] rather than from established familial and friendship ties [i.e. “Village community”].

Be prepared to take the first step as the newcomer to introduce yourself to an established group when you arrive in a new environment [e.g. office, student dormitory, social gathering, new neighbourhood, etc.]. Unless you are specifically invited to join a group, do not automatically expect the established group to send out the “welcome wagon”. The German culture--unlike the highly relationship-oriented European countries whose initiating communication behaviour serves to facilitate emotional comfort and social networking--is highly “fact-oriented”. This extends to a recognizable difference in the communication behaviour extended to “friends” [“Freunde”] and “acquaintances” [“Bekannte”]. Be prepared for unsolicited attempts to start a conversation with a complete stranger in a new environment to be awkward, often taking the form of very stilted Qs & As.

The concept of “mingling” doesn't really exist in the German culture. The reason for this can be found in the historical roots; the “village community” mentality of countries like Germany, as opposed to the “settlement community” mentality that evolved in immigration countries. This manifests itself directly in the culture's typical communication behaviour. North Americans and Australians, for example, are excellent “minglers”, and the host of a social gathering plays his/her role in introducing his guests to each other with the aim that, as the party reaches full swing, no one will be a complete stranger to the others and be left standing holding a drink by himself in the corner. Be prepared for precisely this last scenario if you arrive at a German party knowing only the host, or only one or two other acquaintances. German parties are generally where good friends go to hang out together, and not seen as a chance to meet “new people”. It is not uncommon at parties to see one or two guests initially converse awkwardly with a few individuals only to eventually be relegated to sit alone, as established cliques of friends form with each new arrival.

If you are a North American or Australian of non-European ethnicity, be prepared for Germans to assume quite openly that you are from a part of the world based on how you look. Despite the fact that Germany is a de facto “multicultural” society today, it is, like most European countries, a traditionally non-immigration, mono-cultural country. Moreover, despite the “multi-kulti” trend in the media today, the psychological distinction between “German” and “foreigner” is very much based on ethnicity. Therefore, North Americans and Australians of “visible ethnicity” should be prepared for a typical line of questioning from perfect strangers that attempts to establish where you are “really from”.

Giving compliments is not part of German business protocol and can often cause embarrassment and awkwardness. Employees would, of course, be appreciative of praise from superiors, but do not expect it. Compliments, especially from strangers or very casual acquaintances can, in fact, be taken with suspicion [“What does he/she really mean to say or want?”].

Germans traditionally use “Wie geht es Ihnen?” [“How are you?”] as a literal question that expects a literal answer, in contrast to the common English usage of “How's it going?” to simply meaning “Hi”. It may, therefore, be considered strange or superficial to ask the question and keep on moving without waiting for an answer. Many people, when asked, will, in fact, give you a very detailed answer, including why they are not doing well at that moment! The “Americanization” of the usage of “Wie geht es Ihnen?” as a casual greeting is nonetheless catching on, something many people find irritating and label “superficial”.

If you are an invited guest, or coming for the first time from a potential partner company in a very relationship-oriented culture like the Middle East, Africa and the Far East, be prepared for a different margin of hospitality. The German fact-oriented culture makes a very clear distinction between time spent to cultivate business and personal relations. Unless a close personal relationship already exists between the business partners, businesspeople coming from very relationship-oriented cultures should not expect immediately to be invited into private homes to meet the family, or to be shown an effusive hospitality of the kind they know in their home culture. In such cultures, going all out for guests and personalizing an otherwise sterile connection is a matter of considerable personal pride and desire for “face” for everyone involved. In more individualist-oriented cultures, such as the German one, group harmony and the other's “face” are generally secondary to individual needs and comfort.

Therefore, even if you are staying for several days, do not expect German colleagues to take you out every evening for meals and an evening program, as they will assume that you will want to have time to yourself after business hours, since this has high priority for them in their culture. If you are hosting German guests, keep in mind that it may not be necessary to arrange a full program for them. It is very likely that they will want some time for themselves to pursue their own interests or simply to relax a bit away from business.

Welcome Topics of Conversation

Sports, particularly football [the national sport]

Travel, recent holidays

Current events, politics [if you know what you're talking about]

Work and professions

Your previous experiences and travels in Germany and other parts of Europe [just make sure you know your geography!]

Among those who imbibe, beer is often a good topic of conversation. Germany produces some of the finest beers in the world, and seasoned drinkers enjoy comparing and contrasting the qualities of the various brews available.

Topics to Avoid

World War II/the Holocaust [although sometimes you will be surprised at how openly and frankly Germans of all ages will make reference to or comment on their history]

Personal questions [especially salary, cost of personal objects] among people you don't know or know well, especially in a business environment [work and family life are usually kept separate]

First names are usually reserved for family members, as well as friends and close colleagues.

Moreover, in German business culture, it's not uncommon for colleagues who have worked together for years to remain on a formal, last name basis. This can reflect, on the one hand, a pronounced institutional hierarchy in German society which requires a degree of formality [much less than in, for example, East Asian and South America, but much more so than in very casual North America and Australia/New Zealand].

On the other hand, the formal “Sie” form of “you” can also be used to impose psychological and emotional distance between oneself and another person, if this is desired. English native speakers who speak German often find it tricky to navigate between “Sie” and the familiar “Du”. Foreigners coming from hierarchical cultures may especially find it difficult to overcome their natural insecurity and disorientation if invited by an older German to “duzen” [use the familiar “Du”].

The point here is that if the German offers to “duzen”, the foreigner should not worry about insulting [loss of “face”] or showing disrespect to the older or higher-ranking German.

The general rule would be to always use “Sie” unless someone specifically offers you the “Du”. [Note that among students and younger people, “duzen” right from the beginning is the standard.]

In business, it is often the case that a multinational American company has an English-speaking corporate culture, with all colleagues being on a first name basis. You, as a visitor, may also be invited to use first names with your contacts. This will not be problematic in a multinational group, but it can prove to be tricky when you suddenly switch to speaking German with a German member of that group, especially if he has a very senior rank and is older than yourself. What do you do when, in English, you have been addressing him by his first name, but now, in German, your instinct tells you it would be very strange to use “Du”? Go with your instinct, and do what would be “normal” in the given language.

In other words, do not necessarily switch to Herr So-and-So [too drastic], but do use “Sie” to establish a balance between familiarity and acknowledgement of rank. Again, only switch then to “Du” if the individual invites you to do so. If you are in a situation where you simply are not sure, do not hesitate to ask a German of similar rank to yours what is appropriate. [Note: it is not uncommon, especially in younger high-tech companies, where “duzen” is the company policy across the board.]

In accordance with German business protocol, in very formal business meetings, the highest ranking person enters the room first, regardless of gender or age. However, the more informal the meeting, the more likely it will be that Germans will enter a room in no particular order of rank. Professional rank and status in Germany are largely determined by the individual's achievements. Therefore, if you come from a highly hierarchical culture [African, Far Eastern, South American, Middle Eastern], be prepared for a woman or younger person to have the highest rank in the German group you will be dealing with. Though few women hold very high-ranking positions in the German corporate hierarchy, they are present at middle management level and in the academic sector. Therefore, they will be involved in project meetings, organization and project co-ordination, and negotiations. Women with rank in a company may well feel frustrated and annoyed if foreign business guests/partners talk “over their heads” to male colleagues who may even be their subordinates. This could be interpreted as being extremely disrespectful and aggressive behaviour towards them.

“Dr.” can be a medical or academic title, and is often used, especially among Germans, as part of their names [e.g. in passports, in phone books, on official documents, all forms of official addresses, etc.]. Accordingly, Dr. Martin Meyer should be addressed as “Herr Doktor Meyer”. If you are going to meet a professor, address him/her as Herr [or Frau] Professor [Surname]. Accordingly, Prof. Dr. Karin Schmidt should be addressed as “Frau Professor Schmidt”.

“Fräulein” is very much out of fashion today. Once a girl comes of age, she is normally addressed as “Frau” in public.

When shopping or approaching a customer service provider, it's common courtesy here to say “Guten Tag” [“hello”] upon entering an establishment, and later “Vielen Dank, auf Wiedersehen” [“thank you, goodbye”] to the presiding store clerk when leaving. Greeting strangers on the street, however, with a “hello” or “Guten Tag” is not expected [see “Public Behaviour” above] and you may well get no reaction despite there having been direct eye contact.

Telephone etiquette expects the person who answers the phone to identify himself to the caller with his last name, in the home as well as in the office. A simple “Hello” can throw the caller off in slight confusion, leading him or her to ask point blank “Who I am speaking to?” Note that “hallo” is also often used to get someone's attention, much like “Excuse me” in English.

In general, gift giving is an important symbolic gesture practiced in all cultures. However, as practiced differently from culture to culture, it is essentially a matter of knowing when to offer the gift and how large or small the value of the gift should be given the relationship. In Germany, a small gift is polite, especially when contacts are made for the first time. Substantial gifts are not usual, and certainly not before a deal has been reached if you don't want your intentions to be misinterpreted.

Even small souvenir-style gifts to thank local staff for their assistance and hospitality during your stay at a company will not be expected but will always be appreciated. Avoid giving substantial gifts in private. The larger the gift, the more official and public the giving should be.

Gifts are expected for social events, especially to express your thanks after you have been invited to a dinner party at a home. Avoid selecting anything obviously expensive, as this may make the other person feel “obligated” to your generosity. A lovely bouquet of flowers [though not red roses] for the lady of the house is a typical gift. When purchasing this at the flower shop, ask the florist to wrap it up as a gift [“Würden Sie das bitte als Geschenk verpacken?”].

Upon returning home, remember to send a hand-written thank you card to your hosts for their invitation.

Appreciated Gifts

For the company you are visiting, quality pens, tasteful office items with your company logo, or imported liquor are usually safe choices.

Fine chocolates can also be an appropriate gift when you are invited to a home.

If you decide to bring alcohol, a good imported liquor is the safest choice.

You can also bring a wine of excellent vintage from your home country or an exceptional imported red wine. A gift of German wine, however, should then be a more upmarket label.

If you are staying with a family, good gift selections can include coffee table books about your home country, or anything that reflects the interests of your hosts and is representative of your country.

An elegant, tasteful silk scarf can be an acceptable gift for the lady of the house.

A local food speciality of your home country is usually a good idea for a gift, provided it is not too exotic. Keep in mind that German tastes are generally on the conservative side, so especially for older hosts, very unusual food gifts may well be under-appreciated.

Gifts to Avoid

Red roses are for lovers; lilies are used in funerals. A general rule would be to avoid including heather in a bouquet as it is commonly planted in cemeteries.

Clothing, perfumes, and other toiletries are considered far too personal to be appropriate gifts. Scarves, however, are acceptable gifts according to German business protocol.

Avoid bringing beer as a gift, since many of the finest brands in the world are already produced and widely available here.

Bring plenty of business cards. Businesspeople from the Far East and Arab countries should provide the English translation of the information on one side of their cards, as well as the romanization of their names, for easier initial communication. Unless you will be exclusively dealing with Germans, it is unnecessary to have the reverse side translated into German.

Germans, like other Europeans, write their first names before their family names and should be addressed by the academic title given on their card [e.g. “Dr.”]. Include your full title or position, and any university degrees you have earned or optionally professional organizations with which you are affiliated. When designing your card, keep in mind that German businesspeople will want to learn as much about your background and qualifications as possible.

Unless you are in the IT branch of business, meetings normally follow a formal procedure presided over by the chairperson of the meeting. Follow the example of the senior participants as to how informal or formal you should act, dress, and sit. If it is the very first meeting for you in Germany or in a particular company and you are unsure about in-house procedures, do not hesitate to ask your host in private what you should expect or do. Do not think that this would put your host in any uncomfortable or awkward position; neither should you yourself feel embarrassed about having to ask. Germans are very straightforward and direct, especially in the business environment. It is part of their normal communication behaviour for someone to openly ask for clarification. This is to prevent complications later when it is revealed by accident that someone had not understood instructions or expectations.

The German side will arrive at the meeting well informed, and will expect the same from you. Even at initial meetings where, in your culture, you may spend most of the time getting acquainted and building a personal relationship between you and a potential business partner, expect the Germans to address issues, problems and facts through very technical communication behaviour. If this is not your intention in the initial meetings, make a point of clarifying your intentions and expectations beforehand, so that both sides are aware of the other side's expectations and likely communication behaviour.

Because Germans are schedule-oriented for a most efficient management of business time, expect their business communication behaviour to be very agenda-based. Germans tend to be intensely analytical thinkers, requiring lots of facts and examples from the other side to back up their position. Objective facts are the basis for truth in German business culture, and legalistic, rational reasoning is the cornerstone of business negotiations and communication. Ultimately, personal feelings and relationships cannot be relevant to business negotiations, as this can compromise the fairness or integrity of the deal.

Contracts, therefore, if not holy, are certainly final after signing. Manoeuvring for further concessions is not possible, unless both sides agree on it. Failure to honour the terms and conditions of a signed contract can lead to legal action taken against the partner. Businesspeople from cultures that traditionally regard contracts as mere "statements of intent" which later respond to the realities and nature of the partners' relationship should not expect German enterprises to be able to adapt too much to this way of thinking. Attempts to continue negotiations or revise fixed terms will create distrust and suspicion and may be grounds to terminate the agreement.

German businesspeople tend to be traditionally cautious of new ideas and concepts. Institutional change comes very slowly and often quite reluctantly. Therefore, German businesspeople do not respond as much to the "sell" as North Americans, Australians and Spaniards, which are typically "high risk-taking" cultures. Tone down the "hype" and provide lots of logical argumentation and concrete examples to back up your proposal based on much more facts and data than you would use in your home culture.

Similarly, flexibility and spontaneity are not prominent traits in German business culture. The bigger and older the institution, the more slow-moving internal management will tend to be. Risk-taking, or challenging rules and traditional authority are not considered desirable, partly because of institutional hierarchy, but also, why change something that has proven itself through time?

Detailed planning has enormous value in German culture and is a principal characteristic of German business co-operation. This can turn out to be a smooth marriage between partners or lead to one partner feeling hen-pecked by the other. Again, as with gift giving [see above], all cultures rely on exchanging and clarifying details to move a project forward. It is rather a question of how much detail at what point. Therefore, as with all points where priorities and technical expectations differ significantly between parties, it is essential that both sides do their homework beforehand and perhaps schedule a few informal initial mini-meetings to address these issues and set some basic ground rules that everyone can agree on.

Having said all that, ensure you have plenty of data and other empirical evidence to support your proposals and arguments. If you are conducting the meeting in German, keep the language simple and direct. Even when you think you sound much more direct than you would ever be in your own native language, keep in mind that this will not likely be the case for German ears.

[Note that American business English tends to be very direct, and therefore may not differ much in tone from the general usage of German.] In fact, too much diplomatic indirectness will be confusing and irritating for Germans and can give the impression of insincerity and beating around the bush. Exaggerated and overly dramatic communication styles can also inspire distrust and caution.

When you are preparing promotional or presentation material, be aware that German businesspeople are traditionally less impressed by glitzy advertising, illustrations, and memorable slogans. Brochures aimed at the German market are often more serious in tone, provide substantially more technical data, and make claims that can be proven by hard facts and examples. Don't worry about producing a brochure that seems lengthy or tedious; if the information is pertinent, especially for a technical product, your German counterparts will be inclined to read the whole thing. Moreover, they will expect your product to conform exactly to the description you have given.

Germans will sometimes look for deficiencies in your products or services and will quite openly draw your attention to them if they in any way do not correspond to your claims. This is one of the toughest aspects of German communication behaviour you will encounter, in personal or professional contact with Germans. This form of direct disagreement and criticism is possible in social interactions, not because people don't feel uncomfortable when they hear it, but because such a statement is based on objective, impersonal truths. Ultimately, the value lies in pointing out a mistake to someone so that it can be corrected. This is a characteristic "low context" communication behaviour that works because it is based on isolating and clarifying objective facts.

Similarly, Germans have no problems saying "no", "I can't", or "This is impossible" if that is what they mean. If a rule says something cannot be done, or if the person doesn't eat a certain type of food, he or she will likely say so--not due to any intended insensitivity or discourtesy toward the other's feelings, but as a simple statement of fact. In the event, even if you may feel uncomfortable, keep to the facts, be prepared to apologize [but not excessively!] for any errors [apparent or mistakenly perceived], and be in a position to provide a very plausible explanation or solution.

Interestingly enough, having said all that, Germans can be quite sensitive to criticism themselves. As theirs is a more individualist-oriented culture, they are more sensitive to their own public "face". Therefore, you should be especially aware of unintentionally saying or doing anything to embarrass them publicly. Practice diplomacy whenever you can, especially if the other party is not prepared or in a position to do it himself/herself. Successful and effective diplomacy is predicated on seizing the initiative, taking on the burden to create the most productive environment conducive to a long-term relationship, regardless of how skilled or unskilled the other is in contributing to that relationship.

German businesspeople will not make concessions easily. They will, however, look for common ground and this is your best route to making progress when negotiations reach an impasse. Be warned that any attempts to be aggressive and confrontational with a sizeable German company are usually counterproductive.

While Germans generally prefer to maintain an air of formality, they can become very emotional if their sense of order and routine becomes challenged. East Asians, for example, whose public behaviour is far more strictly bound by etiquette of "correct behaviour" should be prepared for Germans [and generally Westerners] to show less restraint in revealing their personal mood and emotions in public.

Germans, generally, are very private people. Therefore, do not discuss personal matters during business negotiations. Nonetheless, despite their value of keeping business and private relations separate, it is not at all impossible to cultivate relationships on more personal terms with your business partner. Simply realize that Germans need more time to form relationships on a personal level. At the beginning of a new relationship, don't feel you need to go to as much trouble or show as much enthusiasm as you may normally do in your home country or with others from similarly relationship-oriented cultures. This will not be expected, and excessive efforts to force a personal level of contact can leave the other with an uncomfortable feeling of obligation to you.

Decision-making in German business culture is slow, protracted, and every detail relating to your proposal will be painstakingly examined. Therefore, do not expect substantial decisions to be made spontaneously at the table. However, once a decision is finally made, it is extremely difficult to change.

In German culture, rules of any kind are meant to be taken seriously. Moreover, if you break the rules, you will be reprimanded. You will have to make an effort to become sensitive to the implicit and explicit rules that shape this society.

At the end of a meeting or presentation, Germans often signal their approval or thanks by gently rapping their knuckles on the tabletop instead of applauding.

Unless you have made initial efforts to address each side's priorities and expectations for initial meetings, expect Germans to show up with a very detailed agenda that they will work through efficiently point by point with very little time given to small talk or other secondary points they have not considered important. This problem-oriented, time-managed way of conducting meetings can result in some very typical communication patterns, especially if the intercultural communication language is German.

The "Q & A exam": meetings, even initial ones where you think the two parties are meant merely to get acquainted with one another, will often acquire a tone similar to an academic oral examination. Questions will often come hard and fast after a brief introduction of persons. You may often be interrupted in the middle of your answer, once the other party has the feeling of having received a satisfactory answer to his question, at which point he will move on to his next question. This will be especially tricky and quite uncomfortable if you happen to be alone, sitting across the table from four or five Germans.

Interruptions are also quite common if the other person has the feeling you are getting off topic. Persons from highly relationship-oriented cultures, where emotional comfort and the preservation of "face" has priority over truth-based issues, must therefore be careful of being "run over" in meetings and discussions with fact-oriented communicators. Typically, the former is conditioned to "give way" for the sake of group harmony, while the latter is focused on the logic and integrity of the facts of an argument and feels no restraint in carrying out his or her point.

Since interruptions are effective tactics for being heard in a discussion, Germans will often continue to speak, or continue to speak louder in order to avoid being interrupted by someone else. In such cases, one continues to speak until the other simply gives way.

Breakfast meetings are not part of German business culture. However, when Germans get together for dinners after business, talk often remains about business; especially as Germans generally find it difficult to do small talk with people they don't know well. Business talk mixed with a pinch or two of general personal conversation tends to be the mix with which many German businesspeople are most comfortable.

German businesspeople, as a rule, do not make business decisions during mealtimes. Follow the example of your German dining companions and wait for them to initiate any discussions about business.

Lunch is the primary meal for business discussions and is usually served from 12:00 to 1:00 p.m. Except for a few official dinners, do not expect your German hosts to entertain you with an evening program every day. They will expect you to want to have some time to yourself. This is because Germans themselves clearly separate private time from their professional duties.

In some of the more informal restaurants during peak hours, you may be asked if you would mind sharing a table with other patrons, instead of waiting for a free table. If this happens, and you accept, you are not obligated to initiate conversation with your tablemates and socialize with them throughout the meal, as is often the typical behaviour in many relationship-oriented cultures.

Non-smoking sections in restaurants are still uncommon in most European countries. North Americans, especially, should refrain on exercising their "non-smoker rights" too vocally here, as this can provoke aggression and will be met with very little public support [even from the management!].

Etiquette regarding who should pay at the end of a meal is quite different in German culture. The person who extends the invitation will be the person who pays. It is not at all expected that the guest should even offer to pay. This is very different from the etiquette prescribed in relationship-oriented cultures, where the designated guest still makes a significant “show” of fighting for the bill, with the aim of giving generous “face” to the host. Especially East Asians should refrain from their typically dramatic and persistent efforts to obtain the bill, as this will not only create confusion and embarrassment in their German hosts, but in some cases it could be that they do, in fact, end up with the bill. Don't forget: Germans are likely to take your insistence literally! Similarly, businesspeople from relationship-oriented cultures should not expect a “fight” for the bill from German guests. If they are the guests, it will be clear for them who is paying.

Tip: if you really feel like you need to put up a little “fight”, it's better to do it before you go to the restaurant.

Dinner is usually served from 7:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., and this is also the customary time for dinner parties to begin. Consequently, dinner parties usually end at around midnight or later.

A very important note: if a German colleague or friend merely suggests that you go out together to get something to eat, this is not to be taken as an invitation! In other words, he will not be offering to pay. Typically, in German restaurants, the waiter will come at the end of a meal and ask if the total should be “zusammen” [totaled together on one bill] or “getrennt” [separate bills]. Unless you have been explicitly “eingeladen” [“invited”], you can expect the waiter to be asked for separate bills, where the waiter will add together what you have just eaten and you will be paying him directly at the table. Therefore, an important point to remember for members of very relationship-oriented countries, who are culturally conditioned to symbolically offer to pay or “fight” for the bill, this will not be expected from the German, and if your intention is only symbolic, the chances are very good that he/she will take it literally.

German cuisine is traditionally heavy on the meats and sauces. This may present problems for people with special diets [health reasons, religious beliefs, vegetarians, allergies, etc.]. However, the important point here is that it will not cause irritation or embarrassment for your German hosts if you inform them of these restrictions directly. While it is important for members of highly relationship-oriented and strong hierarchical cultures to remain silent out of deference to the host's “face” or his/her perceived rank in relation to themselves, directness does not have a negative value in German culture, provided you communicate your needs politely, reasonably and in advance. Do not always expect Germans to ask you if there is anything you do not eat. Because Germans are direct communicators, they will expect someone to speak up if they want something, disagree about or don't like something. Irritation and inconvenience will rather result if you remain silent and “spring” the problem on the host only when the dishes are being served.

Germans do not often entertain business associates in their homes. If you are invited to a home however [which is more common at higher management levels and among academics], consider it a relationship-building gesture. You may be invited to a sit-down dinner in the evening, or a more common invitation is for afternoon “Kaffee trinken” [“drinking coffee”, which basically means “eating cake”].

Sit-down dinner parties begin quite punctually. If you must be late for any reason, it's important that you call and notify your hosts. Again, as with all appointments, you should give a plausible explanation for the delay.

Do not presume to seat yourself at a gathering: whenever possible, wait to be told where to sit [or wait for the host to tell you to sit wherever you like].

Traditionally, the most honoured position is at the head of the table, with individuals of the greatest importance seated first to the left and then to the right of the head of the table. If a couple is hosting, often one will be at one end of the table, the other at the opposite end.

Only very occasionally, at more formal dinner parties, couples may be broken up and seated next to people they do not know. The intention of this arrangement is to introduce new acquaintances and promote conversation, especially if the guests are an international mix and more comfortable with small talk.

An “aperitif”, in the form of a liqueur or cocktail, may be served before dinner. When this same drink is served after the meal, it is referred to as a “digestif.” Aperitifs or digestifs are usually served cold.

The most common toasts are “Zum Wohl!” [with wine] and “Prost!” [with beer], both of which generally mean a wish for good health. When making a toast, it is important to maintain direct eye contact from the time the glass is raised, until it is placed back on the table. If many people are being toasted, make eye contact with each individual around the table as you make the toast. This rule becomes even more important to remember as you move west to east through Germany.

When eating, always use utensils; very few foods here are intended to be eaten with the hands. North Americans will be surprised to find that even pizzas are eaten with a knife and fork, unless sold by the piece to go. Also, refrain from making audible slurping sounds when eating or drinking soup! This is considered very bad table manners not only in Germany but throughout Europe. When eating, do not lean far over your plate, but remain relatively upright, leaning slightly forward as you bring your fork or spoon towards your mouth. Note that if you are familiar with French table etiquette you won't have any problems in Germany.

In Germany, the knife is used much more actively throughout the meal. Eating with only one hand, with the other hand placed on one's lap under the table is not considered sophisticated table etiquette.

There are often many additional pieces of cutlery, such as for appetizers, or buttering bread, for dessert, etc. If you are unsure of which utensil to use, the best policy is to start from the outside and work your way in, course by course.

If you do not want any more food or drink, say so politely [see above re: food restrictions]. Germans will not ask again, as they expect you to express your personal wishes. They will also not take it as impolite or an insult if you say “no”. Try not, however, to leave significant portions of food on your plate, as this may suggest to your host that you find something wrong with it.

Unlike relationship-oriented cultures where many gestures of social interaction express and reinforce the emotional comfort between two parties, Germans can act and react quite literally. For instance, Germans do not generally serve other people. Plates of food are passed around the table and each person takes what and how much he wants. Therefore, do not expect to be served by your host or fellow diners, even if you are the honoured guest, and vice versa. The host will, however, often ask his guests if they would like more to drink. In the case of wine, the host usually does the pouring, but if this is a large table, it is perfectly normal to pass the wine bottle to the person who wants it and he would pour for himself or herself.

When the meal is finished, the knife and fork are laid parallel to each other across the right side of the plate. It will be taken as a signal to your waiter or host that your dishes can be cleared away.

When not eating, but still have the knife and fork in your hands, ensure that you keep only your wrists resting above the table. When eating, never put your elbows on the table.

If those around you are not smoking, you should ask permission before lighting up. Also, before you smoke, it's considered polite to offer cigarettes to those in your company.

For restaurants and taxis, a tip of 10% or slightly less will be sufficient.

If you do not speak German, be careful of automatically addressing a person in English. While Germans generally speak very good English, some may well feel offended at the presumption. There is some noticeable resentment among especially the 45 to 60 age group, which generally doesn't feel as secure in the language as the next younger generations, which have grown up with a prevalence of English introduced into many aspects of German commercial life.

Germans do not expect to be greeted by strangers, even when eye contact has been made, in the office environment. The fact-oriented thinking is, “since I don’t know this person, there is no relationship, so there is no need to get into superficial pleasantries”. Generally, the smaller the office is, the more greetings will be forthcoming and expected, but the bigger the environment is, the less it will be expected and offered, especially if you are not a permanent member of the staff.

Generally, Germans prefer third-party introductions whenever possible. This has to a significant degree to do with a “wait and see” communication behaviour that evolved from the historical “village mentality” They will not expect to be approached by complete strangers and will not as a rule do the same to establish some points of commonality through fluent small talk. Small talk is an elusive and difficult skill for most Germans, even in business, as the nature of their social relations does not require communication tools to support initial relationship building between strangers. Therefore, the traditional “Gemütlichkeit” [“cosiness”, or “relaxed mood”] Germans talk so fondly of when getting together socially, is reserved for, indeed only possible, within a close circle of family and friends.

The German culture is considered a “middle hierarchical” culture. That is to say, institutional hierarchy is well defined and strictly observed, and is quite obvious in the individual's communication behaviour. Corporate rank demands a degree of privilege and respect from subordinates, which can result in much less open channels of communication than found in cultures with flatter hierarchies, as in Scandinavia, and/or a very strong individualist orientation as in North America/Australia. Therefore, keep in mind that to whom, when and the way you are introduced will indicate how you are perceived and how Germans fit you into their corporate hierarchy.

Firm, brief handshakes at the time of arrival and departure are standard in both business and social relationships. Hugging and kissing on both cheeks are common only among good friends and family members [though hand-shaking between parents and grown children, or between adult siblings is not at all uncommon]. When arriving and leaving, take the time to shake hands with everyone individually in a group. The simpler American “group wave”, for example, will not be appreciated in all but the most casual and familiar gatherings.

Eye contact during the introduction is serious, direct, and should be maintained as long as the person is addressing you. Even in public between strangers, eye contact or out and out staring can be direct and not necessarily smiling. It would be wrong, however, to assume that all stares in public are meant to be threatening. Nonetheless, do not expect direct eye contact to necessitate some greeting or acknowledgement; the German will also not expect anything from you. This is one of the most typical communication patterns immediately observed by visitors to Germany. If the visitor is visibly foreign, this can unfortunately result in a mistaken perception of the Germans as cold and unfriendly to foreigners. What is essentially a typical example of intercultural miscommunication/misunderstanding, can suddenly misread in an unfortunate, racial context.

Before crossing the street, pedestrians are expected to wait patiently on the curb until the light turns green. Moreover, on streets where there are no traffic lights, be very careful when crossing, since German drivers will not always stop for you.

Several factors [e.g. population density, excessive rules and regulations that govern many aspects of daily life, the fact rather than relationship orientation of the German character] converge into a typically aggressive “driving culture” on the famed German autobahn. Germans can be extremely impatient and aggressive drivers. Reaction time on German roads is much shorter than, say, in North America, where lower speed limits and plentiful space enable a driver to simply take his or her time and take it easy to maneuver, be this while negotiating for a parking space, reacting to a green light, or permitting pedestrians to pass. Tailgating is very common and quite aggressive, especially on the left lane of the autobahn, where etiquette dictates that slower vehicles give way immediately by moving to the right lane. The absence of a speed limit also means that one is always catching up to the next car out in front and having to pass. Be prepared for much more “chasing” and maneuvering, which can make autobahn driving much more stressful.

Although this is usually a very formal, law-obeying society, pushing, shoving, and other displays of impatience in line-ups are not uncommon. Apologies are in such cases not necessarily the rule. Interestingly, despite the high value of rules and social order in most aspects of public life, queuing and waiting your turn are not strong traits in present day Germany. The bakery is a good showplace for this kind of behaviour. Sales personnel themselves do not expect lines and will tend to aggravate the problem by typically asking “Wer is jetzt dran?” [“Whose turn is it now?”]. If you do not move fast and stick to your guns, expect someone brazenly to butt in right in front of you. Petty arguments are not uncommon at such venues, and don't expect the sales person to speak up for you!

You can expect the distance of comfort between strangers in public to be much smaller than is considered normal in North America and Australia, but more than in African and Arab countries. While people in conversation typically maintain a comfortable distance of at least 2 ft between them, the person directly behind you in the supermarket line can be literally breathing down your neck.

Be prepared to move yourself and your goods fast through the checkout line at the supermarket. This is where visitors from cultures with “rubber time” can get a good look at how “time-dominated” cultures work. Pitching your groceries into your bag or shop-cart, digging out your money and pocketing the change, and getting out of there as fast as you can before the cashier starts swiping the next customer's stuff through, is some mean feat of dexterity and co-ordination! If you're staying in Germany for a longer period, you will find yourself developing little anti-stress coping mechanisms to streamline the flow, like giving just bills [in which case you are weighed down by the coinage that quickly accumulates!], going shopping in twos so one pitches the goods while the other pays. Some older folks simply hand their wallets over to the cashier and have her count out the change. Or simply do as we often do, just shove everything back into the cart and sort everything out later at a safe distance. If, however, you decide to take your sweet time, be prepared for some sour looks!

Having made this point be aware that the liberty taken with lines at a bakery doesn't translate to lines at any bureaucratic institution. On a recent trip to Istanbul, Turkey, it was our turn at one of the windows at the general post office. While gluing stamps on our stack of postcards, the clerk managed to finish processing the package from the previous customer, fielded two “short questions” from heads that popped in from the sides of her window and took one phone call that required her to sift through some paperwork. We watched the kind of multi-tasking so typical of the Mediterranean cultures with great amusement, reflecting on how in Germany you only have to look like you might have a request before the clerk will tell you in no uncertain terms that a person “can't possibly do two things at once!”

Visitors coming from “multi-active”, polychronic cultures, which include in various degrees most of the cultures around the world other than Northern Europe and North America and Australia/New Zealand, will have to adapt quickly to a “linear-active”, monochronic order of doing things within a scheduled timescale, or suffer the wrath of the formidable German “Beamter” [public administrative or municipal clerks] that they will not soon forget!