

Philippines: Cultural Tips

Without the necessary introductions, you'll find it difficult gaining access to the key decision-makers.

A skilled "go-between" is often hired to ensure that you can finally have access to the decision-maker.

When introducing yourself to a new customer, letters of introduction from either friends or business associates can be helpful.

In order to reach the decision-maker, you may have to meet several times with subordinates and adapt to the variations in business protocol at different levels of the organization.

English is the language of most business transactions and practically all business or government correspondence in the Philippines.

Business travellers are expected to be on time for all appointments. Although Filipinos may not arrive exactly on time, you probably won't be subjected to a long wait.

Producing "instant results" is not a part of Filipino business culture. Consequently, you will have to adjust any unrealistic expectations regarding deadlines and efficiency.

Appointments can be scheduled up to one month prior to your arrival in the Philippines.

Midmornings or mid to late afternoons are usually the best times for appointments.

Business hours are generally from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Most offices close during the lunch break, which is usually from 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m. The lunch break rarely extends to two hours as Filipinos value their time. Some offices may open from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. on Saturdays.

Government offices are usually open by 8:00 a.m., Monday through Friday. Many senior government officials work late and accept "after hours" phone calls at the office, but never at home. Businesspeople, however, can often be contacted at home.

During social events, keep in mind the general rule that the more important the guests, the later they will arrive [anywhere from 15 minutes to two hours]. Foreign executives should arrive 15-30 minutes late.

At Filipino weddings, guests are expected to arrive on time. It's permissible only for the bride to be late.

Generally, Filipinos take tremendous pride in their personal appearance. There is a prevailing belief that a person's clothing indicates his or her social position and relative success.

You'll find that there is a correlation here between the way you dress and the way you are treated by other people. It may seem superficial, but dressing well is often an intrinsic part of being respected and taken seriously in this culture.

As a visitor, you should dress conservatively until you are certain of the degree of formality expected.

Standard attire for men includes suits with either open-neck white shirts or shirts with ties.

White, long-sleeved blouses and dark suits or skirts are the best options for female business travellers, particularly in the early stages of a visit.

Skirts should be knee-length, while necklines should remain conservative. For women, pants or pantsuits in classic styles can be acceptable, too.

Stylish, bright coloured suits and dresses in quality fabrics can also be good choices for female business travellers.

Many workplaces, such as banks and government offices, require their employees to wear uniforms.

Men may wear a business suit to the theatre or a formal dinner party, and similar events. Women are expected to wear a shorter cocktail dress. Long evening gowns are required only for very special occasions, such as diplomatic functions.

Many Filipino men wear an embroidered shirt called a “barong tagalog.” It is a loose garment that is not tucked in and worn without a tie. Long-sleeved versions of these shirts are often worn to work and to semiformal occasions; short-sleeved ones are only for casual wear.

Shorts and sandals are reserved for the beach.

During a fiesta, don't go outside wearing anything that can be damaged by water; you'll find that Filipino revellers like to drench passers-by.

'Small talk' is an important part of establishing business relationships with Filipinos.

Once you become accepted, you'll find that Filipinos can be enthusiastic conversationalists. Expect to be asked very personal questions regarding your marital status, income, religion, and other sensitive subjects. If you don't wish to answer, side-step these questions as graciously as possible. Do not express annoyance or outrage with the questioner, since 'losing face' has such negative consequences in this culture.

Bear in mind that when Filipinos ask how much you paid for something, it's usually out of concern that you may have been cheated.

It's recommended that you break eye contact several times in the course of a conversation. When you look at a Filipino too intently, it is often interpreted as 'gawking' rather than a sign of attentiveness.

Rather than presenting ideas of their own, Filipinos often prefer responding to the observations of others.

Make an effort not to be too direct when communicating with Filipinos. You'll find that people here will be more receptive to an indirect approach.

Welcome Topics of Conversation

Filipino culture and customs

Family

Fiestas

Sports, especially basketball

Topics to Avoid

Politics

Corruption

Foreign aid

Religion

Criticizing a Filipino

Practically everyone you encounter should be addressed with a title and surname. You'll observe an unusual proportion of titled professionals; this is because Filipino companies usually prefer to reward employees with titles rather than increased responsibilities and salary.

People without a professional title should be addressed in English, with courtesy titles such as "Mr.," "Mrs." or "Miss", followed by their surnames.

When you do not know a person's last name, confer respect by using the terms "Sir" or "Ma'am."

Wives who have husbands with important titles are sometimes addressed as "Mrs.," followed by their husband's title [i.e., "Mrs. Mayor"].

Upper-class Filipinos follow the Hispanic tradition of having two surnames: one from their father, which is listed first, followed by one from their mother. Only the father's surname is commonly used when addressing someone.

Most Filipinos have nicknames, many of which sound unusual to visitors. Once a Filipino asks you to address him or her by a nickname, honour this request. In turn, invite the Filipino to address you by your nickname. If you don't have a nickname, invent one.

Giving gifts, particularly flowers and food, is especially popular in Filipino business culture. Moreover, exchanging gifts is an essential step in solidifying business ties.

Once a contract has been signed, prepare to give your new partners a gift of greater value. These gifts include dinner at a fine restaurant, whiskey for men, and perfume for women. Whatever you decide, avoid being so extravagant in your selection that your gift is perceived as a bribe.

When selecting wrapping paper for a Filipino recipient, you may use any colour you wish, which makes the Philippines somewhat of an anomaly among other Asian countries.

When invited to a Filipino home, bring a gift of flowers, candy or chocolates. Another option is to arrange to have these items sent before your arrival. Avoid bringing alcohol or heavier foods as these gifts may imply that the hospitality is inadequate. Allowances are made, however, for a specialty dish or food that is unique to your home region. Be sure to send a thank-you note afterwards; another small "thank-you gift" is also a thoughtful gesture.

At Christmas, you will be expected to give a small, modest gift to practically everyone you encounter in a business context. This includes everyone who works for you and all service personnel you depend upon regularly.

When you receive a gift, follow the Asian custom by not opening it in front of the giver. Instead, wait until you are alone.

During certain family events, particularly baptisms, it is customary to toss a handful of small coins to any children present.

At weddings, guests will sometimes use pins to attach money--typically peso bills in small denominations--to the clothing of the bride and groom.

Appreciated Gifts

A gift item related to the country or city you inhabit

Fine pens

Stationary imprinted with your company logo

Dinner at a fine restaurant

Whiskey [for men only]

Perfume

Finding a contact that can make the necessary introductions of your behalf to the key decision-makers is often the best way to initiate a relationship with a Filipino organization. Using an intermediary with the right connections can be more effective than trying to establish a business relationship by yourself.

You will have to take several trips over a period of months before concluding your business dealings in the Philippines.

It is not necessary to have your business cards translated; English-only versions are perfectly acceptable.

As in other Asian countries, the business card exchange is an important part of establishing working relationships. For that reason, bring plenty of cards that emphasize your title, since this will help Filipinos to determine your influence and decision-making capacity.

The exchange of business cards tends to be informal, which makes the Philippines somewhat of an anomaly among Asian countries. Nevertheless, when presenting and receiving business cards, do so with both hands. Carefully examine the card you receive and comment on it before carefully putting it in your business card case or on a nearby table.

A Filipino businessperson to whom you have given a card may not always reciprocate. Business travellers should be the first to offer a card.

If a Filipino gives you a business card with his or her home phone number handwritten upon it, consider this as an invitation to telephone. Business in the Philippines develops through socializing, largely out of the office.

“Loss of face”, that is, expressing anger or experiencing any conceivable public embarrassment, has negative consequences in this culture. Visitors will be expected to remain calm and in control of their emotions at all times; expressing anger in public is considered unacceptable.

Since the Philippines has a reputation for violence, it will be in your best interests not to provoke others. Traditionally, the Filipino feels he must act to regain his honour, regardless of the consequences.

If you must reprimand a Filipino employee, it's essential that you do it calmly and in a private, “one on one” situation.

Maintaining cordial relations at all times is essential in this culture; making only positive comments is a good place to start. Negativity of any kind can cause “loss of face”, which has unfortunate consequences in this culture, including loss of reputation as well as the severing of friendships and other meaningful bonds.

Filipinos tend to be enthusiastic conversationalists. In general, they are open to new ideas and concepts, but they will not easily change their assumptions, opinions.

Filipinos must get to know you before engaging in business of any kind, and this involves asking about your family and personal background.

Social, rather than business, contacts are of primary importance in the Philippines. A Filipino must genuinely like and feel at ease with you before agreeing to do business. If your company replaces you with another representative, your substitute will have to re-establish this business relationship. The only exception to this rule is if your replacement is a blood relative.

Doing everything you can to maintain cordial relations and remaining modest at all times will be crucial to your success. A good way to start is to allow your Filipino counterpart to set the tone of the meeting.

If you are running a meeting, ensure that there is some preliminary “small talk”, since establishing a cordial personal relationship is very important in Filipino business culture. Another possibility is to have your Filipino counterparts out for a meal or to attend a sporting event prior to the meeting.

During an initial meeting, it will be helpful to make a mental note of the participants' titles; since all seating arrangements are based on hierarchy, observing where each person sits will help you get a better sense of who the “key players” are in the organization.

When another person is talking, be sure to listen carefully. Moreover, interrupting while someone else is talking is usually considered offensive.

Because the country's educational system emphasizes rote learning, Filipinos tend to think subjectively and associatively. Rather than seeking guidance from a specific set of laws or rules, they will involve themselves personally in finding a solution to a problem.

Immediate feelings tend to guide perceptions of the truth. The Catholic faith is often a profound influence in thinking. When determining the truth, empirical evidence and other facts are rarely considered in Filipino business culture.

Filipino businesspeople try to avoid confrontations of any kind; giving a direct answer of “no” can be especially difficult for them. Consequently, you will have to make an effort not to be too direct when communicating with Filipinos. You'll find that people will be more receptive to an indirect approach.

As a “face-saving” measure, Filipinos will often say “yes” when they don't actually mean it. For example, a “yes” may be used to disguise a lukewarm response such as “I'll think about it” or an outright “no.” You will have to be alert to subtleties in conversation to help discern the sincerity of the response.

In your business dealings, to ensure that a Filipino “yes” really means “yes”, you must get it in writing. If possible, try to get a written agreement at each stage in your negotiations. Typically, Filipino businesspeople feel obliged to honour any written agreement.

When you are unsure of the decision that has been made, wait a few days and then follow up with your contact. At this point, the person may give you a better idea about where he or she is in the decision-making process.

Business travellers and other visitors are not expected to smile with the same frequency as Filipinos. Don't assume that smiling among Filipinos is an indication of amusement or approval. Frequently, smiling is used to mask embarrassment, nervousness, and other feelings of distress. This is why you will sometimes observe Filipinos smiling or laughing during inappropriately sombre or tense moments.

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Rather than presenting ideas of their own, Filipinos often prefer responding to the perspectives of others.

The pace of business negotiations in the Philippines is much slower than you may be accustomed to in North America.

The group, particularly the family, is the prevailing influence in Filipino culture. Before taking action, each person must seek the consensus of the group; there is never a sense that the individual has the authority to have “the final say.”

There is a Filipino concept called “pakikisma”, that is, the need for comradeship and for decisions to be made by the group. Understanding and appreciating this concept will be necessary as negotiations progress.

Only senior management makes the final decision.

Patience is necessary, since the decision-making process tends to be slow and protracted.

The nuclear and extended family are the most important influences of stability and support in this culture.

The entire family may be shamed by the actions of one member.

China, Spain, the United States, and the Muslims are key influences in Filipino culture.

Although Filipinos have limited rights in political and legal spheres, they have become an integral part of the business world, where they experience greater equality than in many other Asian countries.

The concept of “machismo”, that is, the need for men to prove and exhibit their masculinity, remains a strong influence here. Consequently, in Filipino business culture, displays of overly aggressive, domineering behaviour in women will not be well received. Although women in business are expected to be just as competent as their male colleagues, they must calmly assert their influence and authority in a firm, restrained manner.

In the Philippines, there is a prevailing belief that the lighter a person's skin, the higher his or her status. Whites often receive special treatment denied to darker skinned people. You're also likely to observe that some Filipinos regard elements of Western culture as superior to their own.

Although there are many social inequalities, there is a belief that everyone must be treated with civility. Moreover, as people rise in importance, they are expected to behave with heightened modesty and graciousness, especially in their dealings with the poor. For example, beggars are politely refused with the phrase “Patawarin po”, which means, “Forgive me, sir.” Snubbing a beggar may result only in “loss of face.”

It will be in your best interests to accept all invitations to social events, since these occasions are an important part of doing business here.

In Filipino business culture, spouses are included in evening business entertainment.

It's permissible to invite the spouses of your business partners to dinner, but not to a lunch.

When you interrupt a Filipino during a meal, he or she will feel obliged to invite you to join in. This offer is made only for the sake of politeness; just thank the person and decline, insisting that you have already eaten.

Business meals are common, particularly to celebrate the conclusion of a business deal. According to Filipino business protocol, the person who issued the invitation customarily pays. When a woman is hosting, however, most Filipino businessmen will insist upon paying the bill.

Consider it a tremendous honour if you are invited to a Filipino home. This kind of invitation shows that the host has developed a genuine rapport with you, which is crucial to business success here.

Arrive 15 to 20 minutes **after** the time given in the invitation. You will be perceived as overanxious if you arrive early or on time, and perhaps even inconsiderate if you cause your hosts to feel rushed.

You will probably be asked to remove your shoes or wear a pair of house slippers that your hosts have provided for you.

Although it is by no means expected, bringing a small gift of flowers, wine, or cake for the wife of the host is always an appreciated gesture.

Never refer to your host's wife as the "hostess." In the Philippines, "hostess" is another word for prostitute.

Chinese hosts tend to entertain at restaurants and rarely at home. Such parties traditionally have numerous guests, including many relatives. It's important to show respect for any elders present.

Social events tend to revolve around food, since Filipinos are extremely proud of their cuisine, which blends South Asian, Chinese, and Spanish influences.

"Have you eaten?" is a popular greeting, equivalent to "How are you?" in North America. Simply answer, "yes", even if you haven't actually eaten.

For both business meetings and social occasions, seating arrangements are based on the hierarchy. Consequently, it's recommended that you wait to be seated.

At any social event where food is being served, allow the host to ask you several times to sit down. In this culture, appearing overly eager to begin eating is perceived as a sign of greed and vulgarity.

Before eating, wait for the host to initiate these proceedings.

A fork and spoon are the standard utensils. Keep the fork in your left hand and use it for placing food onto the spoon, which should be held in your right hand.

Many of the more privileged families employ cooks to prepare their meals. Consequently, excessively praising the food is inappropriate if the cooking does not reflect the accomplishments of the host. If you wish to compliment the host, it's a better policy to praise the home decor, floral arrangements, or anything else for which he or she can take some of the credit.

In accordance with Filipino business etiquette, leave some leftover food on your plate to signal that your host's generous hospitality has satisfied your appetite. If you leave a "clean plate", your host will probably assume that you haven't been provided enough to eat.

Meals are served with a revolving tray in the centre of the table. The host will usually order a variety of dishes that will be served at one time.

If you are hosting a meal, ensure that you offer a pleasing dessert. Dessert is especially popular in the Philippines at both lunch and dinner.

To beckon a server, use your entire hand, with the palm facing down. In any case, do **not** use your index finger and move it toward you.

Social events often conclude with singing and dancing. Moreover, you will be asked to participate in these proceedings.

Although heavy drinking and revelry are common among businessmen, Filipinos believe that public drunkenness is terribly shameful. Even when drinking, it's important to maintain a reasonable measure of self-control. Moreover, women in the Philippines usually do not drink alcoholic beverages at social events.

After a dinner party, Filipinos often give their guests some of the leftover food to take home, an ancient tradition known as "pabaon."

Consider it a tremendous honour to be invited to Filipino weddings, anniversaries, baptisms, and other intimate family events. Being included in these occasions is an important part of solidifying the personal aspect of a business relationship.

If you are hosting a gathering, it is not enough to invite someone only once to a dinner or a party, since an invitee will usually say “yes” regardless of his or her true feelings. It will be necessary to reconfirm the invitation a couple of days in advance. Moreover, an invitee will often decline through a third party as a “face-saving” measure.

If you are hosting a gathering and decide to send written invitations, keep in mind that R.S.V.P. cards often won't be returned, since Filipinos typically feel obliged to honour written commitments.

Tipping is expected throughout the Philippines. Whether or not a service charge already has been added to a restaurant bill, leave a small tip.

If a hotel concierge has been helpful and accommodating, be sure to leave him between P20 and P30.

Taxi drivers should receive whatever rounded out amount is closest to P5 to P10 or 10% of the fare.

Doormen and porters should receive between P10 and P20.

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Visiting businessmen should expect to shake hands firmly with other Filipino men, both upon introduction and subsequent meetings.

There is not supposed to be physical contact between men and women in public. Rather than initiating a handshake, men should wait for a Filipino woman to extend her hand.

Foreign businesswomen may initiate a handshake with Filipino men or women.

Close female friends in the Philippines greet each other with a hug and kiss. Similarly, close male friends may exhibit close physical contact, such as holding hands or walking arm in arm around a friend's shoulder.

Filipinos often greet each other by making eye contact, then raising and lowering their eyebrows.

When someone raises his or her eyebrows at you, it is often a way of indicating that you have been understood.

Raising one's voice is unacceptable in Filipino business culture. Moreover, it's important to maintain a low, yet controlled tone of voice at all times. Striving to speak this way can help you conduct business with greater effectiveness and may even allow you to project more of an authoritative, confident image.

Don't assume that a smile is an indication of amusement or approval. Frequently, smiling is used to mask embarrassment, nervousness, and other feelings of distress. This is why you will sometimes observe Filipinos smiling or laughing during inappropriately somber or tense moments.

Visitors should avoid staring at Filipinos, who can easily interpret a stare as a hostile gesture. If you are stared at, it will be in your best interests to look away.

It's recommended that you break eye contact several times in the course of a conversation. When you look at a Filipino too intently, it is often interpreted as "gawking" rather than a sign of attentiveness.

When it is necessary to walk between two people, lower your head with your hands clasped in front of you as you pass them. This gesture confers respect.

Because of the years of U.S. military presence in the Philippines, most North American gestures are recognized and understood.

Pointing a middle finger at a person or thing is considered the most obscene gesture in the Philippines.

Since pointing can easily be perceived as an insulting gesture, Filipinos rarely indicate objects or directions by pointing with their fingers. Instead, they indicate with a glance or by pursing their lips.

To beckon someone, hold your hand out, palm downward, and make a scooping motion with the fingers. Beckoning someone with the palm up and wagging one finger can be interpreted as an insult.

You may observe people hissing in restaurants; this is a common way of beckoning servers.

Indicating "two" with the fingers is done by holding up the ring and little finger, instead of the forefinger and middle finger. The thumb is not used to count numbers in the Philippines.

Don't put your hands on your hips when talking. This gesture can be misinterpreted as a challenge to another person, which can be especially dangerous considering the violence-prone nature of this culture.

A Filipino may try to get your attention by brushing a finger against your elbow.