

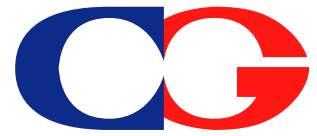


Alexia & Stephan Petersen

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A Canadian's guide to doing business with Germans: 10 points for a good start

What do Canadian professionals need to know about German colleagues, partners, and customers that will help them get off to a positive start and work successfully together?

This checklist is based on aspects of communication behaviour that are repeatedly noted by business and technical professionals as a source of cross-cultural miscommunication and misunderstanding between North Americans and Germans. The points listed here are, of course, generalisations collated from a number of sources, as well as the extensive experience of the authors, which may not hold true in specific individual circumstances. Therefore, while an awareness of these points is critical to conducting business successfully with Germans, readers are advised to keep in mind that such a checklist is intended to be used as a general guide, and should be tested against individual experience.

International business, especially where joint ventures or prolonged negotiations are involved, is fraught with difficulties. Even between such traditionally compatible business communication cultures as Germany and Canada, the absence or presence of intercultural communication skills can make or break a deal. In the least, incalculable benefits and potential can be wasted, and opportunities missed. Canadians with an intention or an existing commitment to doing business with Germans need to know not only *what* to expect but, more importantly, *why* it is that way. Without an understanding of the cultural terrain on which business will be conducted, checklists can guarantee only formulaic action where flexibility and competence may be vital.

Some guidelines:

1. *Don't come across as overly optimistic.* You may be seen as naive. Germans are generally less impressed by "hype", and are likely to become suspicious about "the catch".
2. *Be prepared to offer lots of facts, figures, empirical studies, and market research,* etc. to back up a sales pitch or strategy. Provide as much structure as is needed (e.g. more than you would normally provide at preliminary meetings with North Americans), and be sure you can explain the assumptions underlying the data. Whether in terms of products purchased or a project collaborated on, Germans are uneasy with risks, uncertainty and ambiguity. They will be keen on collecting as much information as possible early on in the relationship to create solid ground.
3. *Schedule meetings weeks in advance and re-confirm your appointments shortly before departure.* Cancellations should also be given as much advance notice as possible along with the reason for the change in plans.
4. *Expect meetings to be formal with a rigid agenda and minutes,* especially at the initial talks stage between potential business partners. Therefore, be prepared to give detailed answers to very specific questions almost immediately. Meetings held for the purpose of "brainstorming" are relatively unusual unless specifically decided on beforehand, or where the meeting is between peers or at the senior level. Otherwise, meetings are usually for co-ordination or briefing or formal ratification of decisions.
5. *Be prepared for far less small talk than you are used to in North American business and social interaction.* This is especially noticeable at initial meetings or first phone calls where Canadians would normally make more effort to make small talk. Making small talk with persons outside the circle of family and friends is not generally considered necessary. Germans keep their private and public/professional spheres clearly separated. Unlike the North American who instinctively tries to close space with even strangers through some form of small talk, Germans feel very awkward with the much more familiar tone of North American conversation. Expect phone calls especially with new German colleagues to be to-the-point with very little socialising. In the absence of small talk, business communication is very much problem-oriented and follows a distinctive Q & A format.

6. *Expect a much more formal communication style than is normally found in Canadian business culture.* The German culture is considered a “middle hierarchical” culture, which means that 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, like in Scandinavia, and/or a very strong individualist orientation like the U.S. and Canada. Therefore, be aware of how you are introduced to others and take this as your cue for the expected communication style.
7. *Be aware of initiating the use of first names and becoming too familiar too soon.* Germans keep their private and professional spheres clearly demarcated, and over-familiarity (e.g. immediate use of first names, not using a person's academic title in one's address, etc.) can be considered bad form. The general rule pertaining to how colleagues address each other is to use *Herr* and *Frau* followed by the last name. (*Fräulein* is rarely used today and can be considered by the young, emancipated German woman as patronising.) First names, in fact, are still rarely used among even those colleagues who have worked with each other for decades!

As a Canadian, do not be surprised if your German colleagues are prepared to adopt the well-known easy Anglo-Saxon familiarity *when conversing with you in English*. If you speak German, however, be prepared to revert to the more formal German style! If you are indeed speaking German, keep in mind that the formal *Sie* is almost always used unless the person “offers” you the more familiar *Du*. Using the first name together with the formal *Sie* is a compromise that is beginning to be heard more often. A notable exception to all this is found among computer specialists, where perhaps the relative newness of the profession naturally fosters both an informal dress style and communication style the world over.
8. *Note that the split between “playing hardball” in the boardroom and socialising outside of it is a behaviour unique to only North America.* In all other cultural regions around the world, where especially the “comfort paradigm” forms the context for business relationships, business is very much a question of personal compatibility and the two spheres cannot be treated mutually exclusive of each other. Note that even while the fact-loving, direct-talking Germans and other Northern Europeans are in this respect more compatible with North American business communication than other cultures, they are not as driven by the “bottom line” as North Americans are, given their longer history, traditions, and own unique cultural values. Be aware of coming across as pushing too hard and disrespectful of the local way of doing things and the structures already in place.
9. *Avoid head-on confrontations in discussions and debates, which seldom leads to results in Germany.* Aim for common ground while representing your position through logical, weighty arguments to support your case. However, note that despite a strong antipathy towards public confrontations, Germans can be more direct and forthcoming than North Americans when it comes to pointing out to someone that he or she doesn't meet acceptable standards of behaviour. This is also served by the “truth ethic” at the heart of the direct German communication style. What may appear to be an indiscreet invasion of private space for persons coming from very individualist cultures such as Canada, is rarely intended to be (or taken as) offensive in a culture that highly prizes social order and requires conformity.
10. *Be careful of sending extra-short emails.* As much as time constraints require us to process emails as quickly as possible, be aware that the stripped down and compacted North American email (no salutation, direct “no”, abbreviations, etc.) can be very disorienting and downright tricky in cases where you don't know the other person well, or the relationship is relatively new, or where a situation is particularly sensitive. Remember that Germany is a “middle hierarchical” culture and the generally more formal tone of German business also translates to German business email. Therefore, make a point of taking more time and care to address critical issues in the interest of a win-win outcome, if possible. If necessary, consider making a more personal phone call.

Alexia and Stephan Petersen are an internationally active team of trainers and consultants. Alexia Petersen, M.A., is an intercultural communication trainer from Toronto, based for the last 15 years in Germany. Dr. Stephan Petersen is a German an engineer and manager with a company active world-wide. Together they consult to a wide range of companies, non-profit organisations, government and cultural institutions, and also teach intercultural communication at various universities. As ExecutivePlanet.com’s “Business Culture Guides” for Germany, they clarify intercultural communication issues for North Americans interested in doing business with Germany. They are also active in the Toronto area; if you are interested in more information, consulting, or training, contact them at www.aspetersen.de.

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