

Tips for Doing Business

by Enid Kopper

Based on intercultural training and business consulting, what are the stereotypes and generalizations, primarily about the German speaking part of Switzerland, as perceived from the standpoint of the outsider? The region (French, German, Italian, Romansch) and the individuals you are dealing with will impact the appropriate behavior, customs and etiquette in the specific situation. I recommend that readers first consider the appropriate behaviour for their own country and business situation for each of the headings.

Common work related stereotypes about the Swiss:

Which values, attitudes and behavior patterns are typically associated with the Swiss? In surveys of both executives and business school professors; expressions such as precision, diligence, reliability, slow but sound decision making, inflexible, impartial in problem-solving, orderly, sober, pragmatic, technically innovative, reserved and discrete, consensus oriented, culturally sophisticated, perfectionistic and independent are used to describe the Swiss.

Titles / Forms of Address:

- The order of names when speaking is first name followed by surname. The surname often precedes the first name on documents and forms; or the first initial is used followed by the surname; e.g. C. Kunz.
- Address Swiss adults by their title (Dr., Professor) or Mr. and Mrs. and surname. It is rude to use first names, unless specifically invited to do so.

Greetings:

- The standard greeting is a handshake when meeting someone and when departing. Shake hands with everybody present, both new acquaintances and people you have met previously.
- Always rise to be introduced to someone. Wait to be introduced by a third person unless you are in a large group, in which case you may introduce yourself.
- Kissing the cheek (or the air next to the cheeks) three times is common among friends; i.e. women with women, men with women, but not men with men.

Dress:

- Conservative dress is expected in business. Sport coats and colored shirts for men, as well pant suits for women, are acceptable.
- The Swiss are discrete about wealth. Do not wear ostentatious jewelry, fur coats, etc.

Gestures / Non-Verbal Behavior:

- It is impolite to talk with your hands in your pockets.
- Before walking into someones office, knock first and wait to be invited to enter. Even if the door is open, it is better to pause on the threshold.
- It is common to hold the door open for women, and to let them go through first.

- Gum chewing in public is inappropriate.
- Do not sit with your ankle on the other knee, or put your feet on a desk or table.

General Business Practices:

- Punctuality counts: always be on time!
- Expectations of quality are high; i.e. exact specifications, attention to detail and form, clearly defined procedures and processes, and consistent performance.
- Put important information in writing. Respond in kind to written requests.
- Respect individual space and privacy. Avoid borrowing and sharing. If unavoidable, always ask the owner first.

Business Discussions and Negotiation:

- German Swiss tend to get right down to business. The French and Italian Swiss are more inclined to some small talk first.
- Proceed in an orderly, structured fashion. Begin with an agenda, an overview of the objectives and then with a factual, well documented proposal.
- Presentations must be carefully prepared. Errors will reflect badly on your attention to detail and credibility in general. Avoid surprises and spontaneity; i.e. think carefully about what you want to say, before you say it.
- Ask questions to draw the Swiss into the conversation.
- Expect deliberations to proceed slowly. Avoid direct confrontation. High-pressure tactics will usually fail.

Management Practices:

- Schedule everything as far as possible in advance. Avoid last minute demands; e.g. for overtime.
- Delegate tasks and set milestones. Close supervision may be interpreted as mistrust in the employees' ability to do the job.
- Evolution instead of revolution: take small steps, not giant leaps.
- Be prepared for a critical attitude towards new ideas. Use personal lobbying to secure support of key people.
- Allow time for decision making. Involve those whose work is affected. Once the decision is made, stick to it.

Business Phone Calls:

- The Swiss answer the phone with their last name only.
- A little informal conversation, about the weather for example, is appropriate before getting down to business.
- Speak very slowly and clearly with frequent breaks to let the other party speak.
- Summarize the results of the conversation, confirm agreement, thank the other party and say a formal good-bye before hanging up.

Entertaining:

- Business lunches and dinners are popular, but business breakfasts are uncommon.
- Business lunches are often quite informal; for example, in the company cafeteria.

- Business dinners usually begin between 7 pm and 8 pm.
- Do not begin eating until everyone is served.
- Keep your wrists on the table at meals.
- Before beginning to eat, people say 'good appetite' in the appropriate language.
- Toasting is a formal process. After your host has proposed a toast, look directly at him or her and respond verbally ('cheers' is generally appropriate, but try to say it in the local language - *prost*). If a small group of 4 to 8 people are at the table, one often touches glasses with each other while toasting.
- The Swiss rarely invite business associates into their homes, but will often make a big effort to entertain foreign visitors on weekends. Be sure and show your appreciation.

Gifts:

- Flowers, chocolates or wine are good gifts when you are invited to a Swiss home.
- A follow-up thank you note to the host and hostess will be appreciated.
- Red roses are only for lovers.

Other Do's and Don'ts:

- The Swiss are very conscientious about formalities and courtesy. Be polite and well-mannered at all times.
- The Swiss generally separate work and private life and take a long time to establish personal relationships. Be patient.
- Sports, travel, hobbies and positive aspects of Switzerland are good topics of conversation. Avoid personal questions.
- Smoking is not as restricted as in some countries, but ask the people with you if you may smoke before you light up; e.g. after a meal.

Closing Comments

Switzerland has survived as a nation for over 700 years by constantly negotiating internal diversity, while at the same time vigilantly guarding against outsiders and potential invaders. Values, attitudes, institutions and forms of government have developed by a process of evolution rather than revolution.

The Swiss use consensus, compromise and pragmatism to handle diversity in their multilingual and multi-ethnic country (approximately 20% of both the Swiss population and the workforce are foreign). This historical development contributes greatly to the success of the Swiss when they do business with people of other nationalities and cultures.

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