

**THE BUSINESS CARD**, that small rectangular piece of paper sitting in your card case or Rolodex, is a vital communication tool, a point of introduction between two people and often two cultures. In the business world, its importance cannot be underestimated. The business card exchange is the first step in the development of a business relationship.

### Calling card

The business card exchange is unique and varies the world over. While the Americans, British and Australians see the transaction of business cards as nothing more than exchanging contact information, business card exchange in certain parts of Europe and particularly in Asia takes on a different meaning altogether.

# Playing the cards right

“The general rule is that, starting from the US and going eastwards, business card exchange becomes increasingly important. This is because the further east you travel, the more hierarchical societies tend to be. So you may experience little formality in the US or UK, slightly more in Eastern Europe and the Middle East and then specific protocol and rituals once you reach East Asia,” says Neil Payne, Managing Director of UK-based cross culture communications consultancy, Kwintessential.

“Understanding and appreciating how people exchange business cards in foreign countries is important, to avoid causing offence.”

The business card exchange can make or break business deals, and this is where business card etiquette comes into play. Business card etiquette takes into account the cultural sensitivities of each country. How you present your card, how you receive the other

person’s card, how you treat the card and where you place the card can determine the outcome of deals.

In Asian culture, the business card is an extension of the person and thus should be treated accordingly. The Japanese are known to treat the business card or *meishi* with utmost respect. In China, Japan and South Korea, present your business cards (the translated side facing the recipient) with both hands and with a slight bow.

Asian business culture is hierarchical, so the business card exchange is based on rank and seniority. Do look at the card for a few seconds before placing it in your business card case or on the table (when in a meeting). One should never write on the other person’s card as this shows disrespect.

“Be sure to have plenty of business cards with you so you don’t run short - and never give out old or

In many parts of the world, the business card exchange is more than just a method of introduction. *Jaswinder Kaur Gill* discusses the important rituals and rules one must be aware of.

faded cards,” advises Martin Roll, CEO of marketing consultancy VentureRepublic. “The important thing is to be polite,” he adds, “possibly a slight bow as you hand it over, and it can be that in some Asian countries, offering with the left hand is considered impolite.” This advice can be applicable to some African and Middle Eastern countries too.

If you do run out of cards, just apologise and explain. After which write down your contact information and pass it to the person. Titles and educational qualifications are very important – in India, Malaysia, Austria, Germany, Poland and Romania – do list them on your card.

Faux pas regarding business card exchange do occur and include “mistakes of putting cards in trouser pockets,” observes Payne. Janet George, a communications consultant, recalls an incident where a participant at a meeting “slid his business card across the table to the recipient, who evidently was not amused.” →



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### Style and substance

Nowadays business cards can be designed, printed and delivered to you in a matter of hours. Entrepreneurs should invest some time in designing an effective business card. When getting a business card printed, the age-old debate of form versus function arises. But an eye-catching design must not override the basic function of a business card – providing contact information.

As a marketing tool, the reverse side of your card is additional advertising space and should not be wasted. You can list your company's services here – this provides your potential client with a quick reference.

The stylistic sense of a business card depends on the field you are in. In traditional industries – banking, for instance – the style is usually simple and elegant. And in Japan, women's business cards are slightly smaller and have rounded corners. Those in the creative fields would tend to have bolder designs and a more liberal use of colour. Traditionally, the business card has a horizontal layout, although the vertical layout is becoming popular too. George attributes this popularity to the "ease of reading the card, for it is like scrolling down pages on a computer screen."

### The future

While portable devices like PDAs and mobile phones allow business people to exchange business cards electronically, Payne says this technology will not affect the popularity of traditional business cards greatly. "The electronic version is purely information centred, whereas the traditional paper based card allows for personal expression in terms of colours and designs. Furthermore, the business card has become an integral part of the process of doing business in many countries," he says.

The business card is more than just a communication tool. It is a stepping-stone to building business relationships. A representative of the person, the company and the culture, the business card may be small – but it carries a lot of weight. ■

### CARD SMART - THE HISTORY OF THE BUSINESS CARD

- The business card as we know it first appeared in 19th century Europe and America.
- The first cards evolved from introductory notes in Europe in the 17th century. They were used by nobility and royalty to announce their arrival – and to get into social circles.
- The first 'business' cards were not used for social introduction, but to generate trade, and were exclusive to the merchant classes.
- With the advent of modern printing techniques in the 1800's, the business card gained popularity among the masses and was no longer the preserve of nobility or tradesmen.
- The absence of a proper street numbering system in London in the 17th century resulted in the creation of tradesmen's cards, as they served both as a form of advertisement and a map.
- There is an International Business Card Museum in Erdenheim, Pennsylvania, USA. Started by Ken Erdman in 1995, the museum boasts a collection of 300,000 cards from 120 countries.