



United States of America

cultural note

executives from the United States are well known for telling acquaintances to use their first names almost immediately. This should not be interpreted as a request for intimacy, but rather as a cultural norm. Even people in positions of great authority cultivate a down-to-earth, accessible image by promoting the use of their nicknames. For example, during the 1992 presidential campaign, the winning Democratic Party used a song that urged listeners to "call me Al," referring to Albert Gore Jr., the vice-presidential candidate.

Country Background

History

The United States was assembled out of colonies owned primarily by the British, French, Russian, and Spanish Empires. Virtually all of this land had previously been occupied by the indigenous people known as Indians, who suffered greatly from this influx of Europeans. (Many Indians nowadays prefer the term Native American; in the north, many Eskimos prefer Inuit.)

The United States of America was formed following its Declaration of Independence from England in 1776. The Constitution dates to 1787. There have always been free elections.

Type of Government

The government is a federal republic system; individual states have sovereignty over their own territory. The president is both chief of state and head of the government, and is elected for a term of four years. An electoral college of delegates from each state elects the president-an unwieldy system that gives disproportionate power to the most populous states. The legislative branch is elected by universal direct suffrage. It is made up of a bicameral Congress, consisting of the 435-seat House of Representatives and the 100-seat Senate.

Language

English is the official language. Spanish is the most widely used second language.

cultural note

the level of literacy in the United States is in dispute, with estimates of "functional literacy" running between 85 and 95 percent. Education is compulsory in most states from age five to age sixteen. It is free up through the secondary school level, although a large number of private schools exist. Schools provide services other than teaching academic subjects, including recreation, team sports, music and arts training, and social events.

Religion

Church and state have always been separate in the United States; however, over three-quarters of U.S. citizens belong to a religious group. Most are Christian. Judaism and Islam each account for about 2 percent of the population.

Demographics

The population of the United States is about 255 million. Since the breakup of the U.S.S.R., the United States ranks as the third most populous nation in the world. The largest city is New York, which has over 7 million people within its boundaries, and more in its surrounding area.

There are people of many different ethnic groups in the United States. The majority are Caucasians of European origin, including English, French, German, Irish, Scandinavian, Polish, Russian, and so forth. However, as the United States is a nation of immigrants, virtually every nation on Earth is represented. Blacks (many of whom prefer the term African-American) constitute 12 percent of the population. Other large minorities are Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans.

Cultural Orientation

Cognitive Styles: How U.S. Citizens Organize and Process Information

In the United States the culture is very ethnocentric, and so it is closed to most outside information. It is very analytical, and concepts are abstracted quickly. Innovation often takes precedence over tradition. The universal rule is preferred, and company policy is followed regardless of who is doing the negotiating.

Negotiation Strategies: What U.S. Citizens Accept as Evidence

In negotiations, points are made by the accumulation of objective facts. These are sometimes biased by faith in the ideologies of democracy, capitalism, and consumerism, but seldom by the subjective feelings of the participants.

Value Systems: The Basis for Behavior

It is often said that Judeo-Christian values are the basis for behavior in the United States. However, these seem to be eroding and being replaced by ego- and ethnocentrism. The following three sections identify the Value Systems in the pre-dominant culture-Their methods of dividing right from wrong, good from evil.

Locus of Decision Making

Although the United States is probably the most individualistic of all cultures, each person becomes a replaceable cog in the wheel of any organization. There is a high self, as opposed to other, orientation emphasizing individual initiative and achievement.

People from the U.S. do not find it difficult to say "no." The individual has a life of his or her own that is generally private and not to be discussed in business negotiations. Friendships are few and specific to needs.

Sources of Anxiety Reduction

There is low anxiety about life, as external structures and science provide answers to all important questions and isolate one from life. Anxiety is developed over deadlines and results because recognition of one's work is the greatest reward. The work ethic is very strong, so that it appears that one lives to work. There are established rules for everything, and experts are relied upon at all levels.

Issues of Equality/Inequality

There is structured inequality in the roles people take, but personal equality is guaranteed by law. There is considerable ethnic and social bias against some minorities. Competition is the rule of life, but there is a strong feeling of the interdependency of roles. Excellence and decisiveness are prized characteristics. Material progress is more important than humanistic progress. Traditional sex roles are changing rapidly, but women are still fighting for equality in pay and power.

Business Practices

Appointments



punctuality

- Punctuality is highly emphasized. In some cities, such as Houston, Los Angeles, or New York, extreme traffic can cause delays. Be sure to allow enough driving time to your destination. If you are delayed, call to let your contact know.
- If you are invited for a meal, you should arrive promptly.
- If you are invited to a cocktail party you can arrive a few minutes late; you do not need to call ahead even if you will be a half hour late.
- People in the United States write the month first, then the day, then the year; e.g., December 3, 1999, is written 12/3/99. This is very different from many Europeans and South Americans, who write the day first, then the month, then the year (e.g., December 3, 1999, is written 3.12.99).
- Prior appointments are necessary.
- The workweek is Monday through Friday, 8:30 or 9 a.m. to 5 or 6 p.m. Many people work overtime.
- Many "convenience" stores (stores that carry frequently purchased products like gasoline, milk, and snacks, and so forth) are open twenty-four hours.



Negotiating

- Business is done at lightning speed in comparison to many cultures. U.S. salespeople may bring final contracts to their first meeting with prospective clients. In large firms, contracts under \$ 10,000 can often be approved by one middle manager in one meeting.

- While knowing the right people and having many contacts in an industry is valuable, it is not seen as being as important for a salesperson as a good history of sales. Sales staff are evaluated and compensated on their "track records" rather than the potential for exploiting their contacts.
- The "bottom line" (financial issues), new technology, and short-term rewards are the normal focus in negotiations.
- U.S. executives begin talking about business after a very brief exchange of small talk, whether in the office, at a restaurant, or even at home.
- Whether a colleague is a man or a woman should be ignored, except when it comes to personal questions. Women should not be asked if they are married. If a woman mentions that she is married, you should simply ask a few polite questions about her husband or children.
- Remember that the United States is the most litigious society in the world. There are lawyers who specialize in every industry and segment of society, from corporate tax attorneys to "ambulance chasers."
- The standard U.S. conversation starter is "What do you do?"-meaning "What kind of work do you do, and for whom?" This is not considered at all rude or boring.
- Compliments are exchanged very often. They are often used as conversation starters. If you wish to chat with someone, you can compliment something that person has (e.g., clothing) or has done (a work or sports-related achievement).
- Until you know a person well, avoid discussing religion, money, politics, or other controversial subjects (e.g., abortion, race, or sex discrimination).
- Some common topics of conversation are a person's job, travel, foods (and dieting), exercise, sports, music, movies, and books.
- Before smoking, ask if anyone minds, or wait to see if others smoke. Smoking is increasingly prohibited in public places: in airplanes, in office buildings, even in stadiums. Large restaurants usually have a section where smoking is permitted. Many hotels designate rooms as smoking and non-smoking.
- Most business people have business cards, but these cards are not exchanged unless you want to contact the person later.
- Your card will not be refused, but you may not be given one in exchange. Don't be offended by this.
- Your card will probably be put into a wallet, which a man may put in the back pocket of his pants. This is not meant to show disrespect.



Business Entertaining

- Business meetings are very often held over lunch. This usually begins at 12:00 noon and ends at 2:00 p.m. Lunch is usually relatively light, as work continues directly afterward. An alcoholic drink (usually wine or beer) may be ordered.
- Dinner is the main meal; it starts between 5:30 and 8 p.m., unless preceded by a cocktail party.
- Business breakfasts are common, and can start as early as 7:00 a.m.
- On weekends, many people enjoy "brunch," a combination of lunch and breakfast beginning anywhere from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Business meetings can be held over brunch.

- When eating out, the cost can be shared with friends. This is called "splitting the bill," "getting separate checks," or "going Dutch."
- If you are invited out for business, your host will usually pay.
- If you are invited out socially, but your host does not offer to pay, you should be prepared to pay for your own meal.
- If you invite a U.S. counterpart out socially, you must make it clear whether you wish to pay.
- Before going to visit a friend, you must call ahead.
- Most parties are informal, unless the hosts tell you otherwise.
- If you are offered food or drink, you are not obliged to accept. Also, your host will probably not urge you to eat, so help yourself whenever you want.
- U.S. co-workers or friends will probably enjoy learning a toast from your country.
- The fork is held in the right hand and is used to cut food. The knife is used only to cut or spread something. To use it, the fork is switched to the left hand or is laid down; to continue eating, the fork is switched back to the right hand.
- Many foods are eaten with the hands; take your lead from others, or if you are uncomfortable, do as you like.
- It is not considered rude to eat while walking; many people also eat in their cars (even while driving). There are many fast-food and drive-in restaurants.
- At a fast-food restaurant, you are expected to clear your own table.

Time

- The contiguous forty-eight states of the United States have four time zones. New York is five hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (G.M.T. - 5). The state of Hawaii is 10 hours behind G.M.T.; most of the state of Alaska is 9 hours behind G.M.T. In most states, daylight saving time is in effect from mid-spring to midautumn.

Protocol



Greetings

- The standard greeting is a smile, often accompanied by a nod, wave, and/or verbal greeting.
- In business situations, a handshake is used. It is very firm. Weak handshakes are taken as a sign of weakness. Men usually wait for women to offer their hand before shaking.
- Good friends and family members usually embrace, finishing the embrace with a pat or two on the back.
- In casual situations a smile and a verbal greeting is adequate.
- If you see an acquaintance at a distance, a wave is appropriate.
- The greeting "How are you?" is not an inquiry about your health. The best response is a short one, such as "Fine, thanks."



Titles / Forms of Address

- The order of most names is first name, middle name, last name.
- To show respect, use a title such as Dr., Ms., Miss, Mrs., or Mr. with the last name. If you are not sure of a woman's marital status, use Ms. (pronounced "Miz").
- When you meet someone for the first time, use a title and their last name until you are told to do otherwise (this may happen immediately). Sometimes you will not be told the last name; in this case just use the first name or the nickname. Nicknames may be formal names which have been shortened in surprising ways (e.g., Alex for Alexandra, or Nica for Monica).
- Be sure your U.S. acquaintances know what you wish to be called. The letters "Jr." stand for Junior and are sometimes found after a man's surname, e.g., Jeff Morrison, Jr., or first name (e.g., Jeff Jr.). Both indicate that he was named after his father. The Roman numeral III, or IV indicates a third- or fourth-generation scion, with the same name as his predecessors (e.g., Patrick Evans III).



Gestures

- The standard space between you and your conversation partner should be about two feet. Most U.S. executives will be uncomfortable standing closer than that.
- In general, friends of the same sex do not hold hands. If men hold hands, it will probably be interpreted as a sign of sexual preference.
- To point, you can use the index finger, although it is not polite to point at a person.
- To beckon someone, wave either all the fingers or just the index finger in a scooping motion with the palm facing up.
- To show approval, there are two typical gestures. One is the "O.K." sign, done by making a circle of the thumb and index finger. The other is the "thumbs up" sign, done by making a fist and pointing the thumb upward.
- The "V-for-victory" sign is done by extending the forefinger and index finger upwards and apart. The palm may face in or out.
- The backslap is a sign of friendship.
- To wave good-bye, move your entire hand, palm facing outward. Crossing the middle and index fingers on the same hand has two meanings: either to bring good luck, or (when hidden) to indicate that the statement the person is making is untrue. Both gestures are used more often by children than by adults.
- There are many ways to call a waiter/waitress over: make eye contact and raise your eyebrows, briefly wave to get his or her attention, or mouth the word for what you want, such as "water" or "coffee." To call for the check, make a writing gesture or mouth the word "check."
- Direct eye contact shows that you are sincere, although it should not be too intense. Some minorities look away to show respect.
- When sitting, U.S. citizens often look very relaxed. They may sit with the ankle of one leg on their knee or prop their feet up on chairs or desks.
- In business situations, maintain good posture and a less casual pose.
- When giving an item to another person, one may toss it or hand it over with only one hand.



Gifts

- Business gifts are discouraged by the law, which allows only a \$25 tax deduction on gifts.
- When you visit a home, it is not necessary to take a gift; however, it is always appreciated. You may take flowers, a plant, or a bottle of wine.
- If you wish to give flowers, have them sent ahead so as not to burden your hostess with taking care of them when you arrive.
- If you stay in a U.S. home for a few days, a gift is appropriate. You may also write a letter of thanks.

cultural note

when staying in a U.S. home, you will probably be expected to help out around the house by making your bed, helping to clear the dishes after a meal, and so forth.

- At Christmastime gifts are exchanged. For your business associates, you can give gifts that are good for the office, or liquor or wine. Most stores gift-wrap at Christmas.
- A good time to give a gift is when you arrive or when you leave. The best gifts are those that come from your country.
- Personal gifts such as perfume or clothing are inappropriate for women.
- Gifts for children are a good idea, but take into account the belief system of the parents. Pacifists (such as most Quakers) would probably object to your giving a toy gun to their child. As U.S. citizens tend to be wretched at geography, any gift that describes the location of your country is a good choice: a colorful map, an inexpensive globe, or even a balloon with a map on it.
- Business gifts are given after you close a deal. Unless the giver specifies a time at which the gift is to be opened (as may happen with a gift at Christmastime), gifts are usually unwrapped immediately and shown to all assembled.
- You may not receive a gift in return right away; your U.S. friend might wait a while to reciprocate.
- Taking someone out for a meal or other entertainment is a common gift.

cultural note

foreigners who watch U.S. films and television may assume that U.S. business people don't wrap gifts—they enclose them in colorful, easy-to-open boxes. But this is cinematic fiction. Gifts in the U.S. are wrapped just as they are in other countries.



Dress

- In cities, conservative business attire is best.
- In rural areas and small towns, clothing is less formal and less fashionable.
- When not working, dress casually. You may see people dressed in torn clothing or in short pants and shirts without sleeves.
- If you wish to wear traditional clothing from your country, feel free to do so.