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Tips for Doing Business in Brazil

Think about Brazil and you probably think of a tropical play land, full of sunny beaches, soccer stars and glitzy celebrations such as Carnivale. But as one of the world's largest countries and the host of the 2016 Summer Olympics, Brazil is also a hub for business growth, expansion and entrepreneurship.

Here are some things to know when doing business in Brazil.

Embrace the city life.

The Federative Republic of Brazil is South America's largest country by both size and population. But its largely urban population – 81 percent of the country's more than 200 million residents live in cities – is concentrated in its two largest and southern cities or Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

Sao Paulo, Brazil's most populated city, has the most Westernized business climate, and as a general rule, the further north you travel in Brazil, the more conservative the business climate becomes.

Learn Portuguese, or have a translator.

Brazil was colonized by Portugal in the 1700s and to this day retains its Portuguese heritage. As such, it is the only country in the Americas with Portuguese as its primary language. Many Brazilians are fluent in English, but it is not universally spoken, especially outside of major cities. Take the time to learn at least some key Portuguese phrases, and use a translator if needed.

Recognize the hierarchy.

Companies in Brazil tend to be strictly hierarchal. As a result, try to deal directly with the decision-makers in an organization instead of working through an intermediary. Superiors make the decisions, so when these people are not available, an elder member of the staff often serves as a stand-in.

But keep in mind that identifying the chief decision-maker may not be easy, as many corporate hierarchies also involve complex political alliances and behind-the-scenes relationships.

Get to know your counterparts.

Business in Brazil is relationship-based, and Brazilians in general don't view business as just a transaction; it's also personal.

To set the tone for success, take the time to develop personal relationships with your Brazilian counterparts. Show a personal interest in the people you are talking to, but avoid topics such as the economy and politics. A long-term commitment to doing business in the country can also go a long way toward moving your relationship forward.

Don't expect timely meetings, and be prepared for small talk.

Meetings generally begin and end with small talk, and a lot of it. While introductory meetings in Brazil can be formal, meetings in general are quite casual and invite lively presentations and open discussion. Agendas aren't always present, and if they are, they may be ignored.

If you are hosting a meeting, begin with some general conversation and take cues from your Brazilian counterparts about when to get to the point of the meeting. Also, don't expect the meeting to start or end

on time, especially outside of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Meetings typically start and finish later than scheduled, making it difficult to schedule more than a few in a single day.

Be expressive.

Brazilians in general are very expressive. They use a lot of body language and may stand closer and use more eye contact than Americans are used to. Emotion in face-to-face communication is also common. Americans doing business in Brazil should embrace this, not be put off or act reserved in the face of enthusiasm.

Look good.

In Brazil, your appearance is expected to reflect your importance, so dress the part. Brazilians believe that if you pay a lot of attention to your appearance, that attention to detail carries over into your business performance. For men, tailored dark suits, long-sleeved shirts, ties and polished shoes are a must. Women are expected to wear feminine dresses or tailored suits, and closed-toed shoes with semi-high heels. At all costs, avoid patterns, and limit makeup.

Keeping up appearances also extends to your accommodations. When staying in Brazil, avoid cheap hotels and always choose first-class accommodations.

