Business etiquette, language & culture

Language
Thai, the national and official language of Thailand and sometimes known as Siamese or Central Thai – together with a number of Thai variants – is spoken by the vast majority of the population.

Use of English is more common in larger businesses, particularly in Bangkok, but proficiency is low or non-existent in the majority of the population, including many SMEs and in rural areas.

Even if your contacts can speak some English, do not assume they will understand all you say. If in English, your presentations should be concise, clear and use easy-to-understand language. If in Thai, do not use an internet translation site, contact AST Language Services: www.astlanguage.com

Interpreters
Communication styles are sensitive and courteous, with care being taken not to offend. Straightforwardness is valued in Thailand. You will likely require an interpreter when dealing with traditional firms, although some English speakers work in newer organisations, particularly those with international business.

Thai culture
Thai life is based around the family, and is particularly important in rural areas. Society is hierarchical, and children are brought up to respect those such as parents and elders at the top. When Thai people meet someone for the first time, they may ask several personal questions to establish where they fit within the hierarchy. This may seem intrusive to a westerner, but is not intended to be rude.

Most Thais practice Theravada Buddhism, and place great importance on courtesy and being non-confrontational. You should avoid raising your voice, angering or insulting others as these can cause loss of face, and can result in them thinking disrespectfully of you. It is therefore best to avoid all public displays of emotion. However, Thais are generally very relaxed and easy going, and laugh very easily – they have a ‘mai pen rai’ (‘it doesn’t matter’) attitude.

General etiquette
It is difficult for most Thais to criticize or give a direct ‘yes/no’ response to difficult questions, so you should try to avoid putting them in an awkward position. However, despite being very easy-going, Thais consider it an insult if someone criticises the Thai
royal family. You should also always treat images of Buddha with extreme respect. Never point your foot at a person or object, point your finger at a person or pass things with your left hand, nor pass items over someone’s head, as the head is regarded as sacred.

Meeting and greeting

The typical Thai greeting consists of the wai, where the hands are raised with the fingers pointing upwards as if in prayer, and the head slightly bowed. The junior person offers the wai first, and the senior responds. However, westerners are usually not expected to know the hierarchical etiquette around how much to bow. Most Thai businesses will likely offer a handshake, but it will always be appreciated if you try to wai as well – just respond if it is offered.

Business etiquette

With the exception of the very south near the Malaysian border (where a number of Thais are Muslim), Thailand is predominantly Buddhist. As many Buddhist holidays are in April and May a number of businesses go on holiday then, so the best months to do business in Thailand are between November and March, which also avoid the extreme heat of summer and monsoon rains.

Meetings should be arranged well in advance and confirmed the day beforehand. You should arrive on time as this shows respect for your hosts. Do not forget to factor-in the traffic congestion in Bangkok, which can cause gridlock at times!

Business relationships develop slowly in Thailand, as Thais will want to get to know you well, so it can take many meetings over months or even years to forge a successful partnership – a one-off visit, or merely videoconferencing – will not be sufficient.

Being a hierarchical society, issues may need extensive discussion at all levels – often over drinks, lunch or dinner – before final decisions are made by senior management. Indeed the purpose of the discussions will not be so much about business as about deepening the relationship. The meal will almost certainly be paid for by your Thai host, so do not insist on paying yourself.

Business cards

Your business cards should be printed in Thai on one side. Hand them face-up and with both hands, and offer to the person with the highest social status first. Receive cards with both hands and study before keeping, ideally making a polite comment. Do not write on them or put in a back pocket!
Presentations

Presentations should be factual and easy to understand, including facts and figures to back up your conclusions. Avoid making exaggerated claims – Thais prefer to conduct business with people who are honest and do not brag about their accomplishments or financial achievements. Always avoid confrontational behaviour and high-pressure sales tactics. Make use of an official interpreter if appropriate, and do not assume all attendees will necessarily have a good command of English.

Thailand public holidays

Public Holidays 2016

Date:
Day:
Holiday:
5 December
Monday
HM the King’s Birthday
10 December
Saturday
Constitution Day
12 December
Monday
Constitution Day Holiday

Public Holidays 2017

Date:
Day:
**Holiday:**

1 January  
Sunday  
New Year’s Day  

2 January  
Monday  
New Year Holiday  

11 February  
Saturday  
Makha Bucha Day  

13 February  
Monday  
Makha Bucha Holiday  

6 April  
Thursday  
Chakri Memorial Day  

13 April  
Thursday  
Songkran Festival  

14 April  
Friday  
Songkran Festival  

15 April
Saturday
Songkran Festival
17 April
Monday
Songkran Festival
1 May
Monday
National Labour Day
5 May
Friday
Coronation Day
10 May
Wednesday
Visakha Bucha Day
11 July
Tuesday
Khao Phansa Day
12 August
Saturday
HM the Queen’s Birthday
14 August
Monday
HM the Queen’s Birthday Holiday
23 October
Monday
Chulalongkorn Memorial Day

5 December
Tuesday
HM the King's Birthday

10 December
Sunday
Constitution Day

11 December
Monday
Constitution Day Holiday

31 December
Sunday
New Year's Eve

Please note: Following the recent death of King Bhumibol of Thailand on the 13 October 2016, check locally for possible changes to public holiday dates for 2016-2017.

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