



EXPERT Q&A



We interviewed a business executive who has been living in Singapore for about six months. Here, he provides his advice on communicating while in the country.

Mark Smedley

Q: At first glance, what is Singapore like?

A: Singapore's always been a trading hub. For about 150 years of its history, it was a British Colony. It's only been about fifty years since Singapore's been independent, so a lot of its customs are British. It's got the world's largest port in terms of shipping, so the Singaporean culture is very international. There are folks from New Zealand, Australia, Germany, France, Italy, the U.S., the UK, Spain, and Portugal. It does have some aspects of Asian culture, but it is very international.

Q: There are four international languages prominently spoken in Singapore: English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. However, locals also speak "Singlish." Is it easy for an American to be confused by the non-official local dialect?

A: You can hear it a little bit when you walk around, but to an uneducated ear, it sounds more like Mandarin. It's almost like the Singaporean version of Cajun, which is a mix of French and English. It's a very local dialect, and its really only spoken by Singaporeans. They'll use it in conversation with each other, but to talk to anyone else, they use English or Mandarin.

Q: So it's not hard to get around as an American?

No. You land in the airport, where they speak English. You can pay with a credit card. All the people in the hotels speak English. People in the restaurants speak English. Menus are translated into English. If you go to an Italian restaurant, it will have the menu in English and Italian. If you spoke a language like French, you would probably have more of a problem, but if you speak English, you'll be fine.

Q: Have you personally seen any communication mishaps between Americans and Singaporeans?

A: Just because you're in a room full of Asians in Singapore, you cannot assume they are Singaporeans. Some are from Malaysia, some are from China, and some may be from Korea. You speak more slowly, you're very respectful, and you don't tell too many jokes. It's really more formal than business in the

Mark Smedley



Formerly a resident of California, Smedley has relocated to Singapore as a result of his position as President of Asia/Pac at Life Technologies. Life Technologies is a global biotechnology tools company dedicated to improving the human condition. The company had sales of more than \$3.3 billion, employs approximately 9,000 people, has a presence in 160 countries, and possesses a rapidly growing intellectual property estate of approximately 3,900 patents and exclusive licenses.

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Like many other Asian countries, it is important to establish a relationship with Singaporean clients. This is usually done in two parts: a formal meeting, followed by a more informal dinner.

U.S., but that's simply because there are so many people from so many cultures.

Q: So how do you make them feel comfortable?

A: The way you make people feel comfortable is you don't make them uncomfortable. You don't tell jokes because you don't know what their sense of humor is. If you tell a joke, and they don't like it, they still have to laugh because that's the polite thing to do.

Q: How is business conducted?

A: Everyone in Singapore loves to eat. Most folks will eat out. If you look at houses here, they have beautiful houses but very tiny kitchens. It's not all unusual to do business, which is more formal, and then go out to dinner, which is more informal. It's like Japan, where their meeting is very formal, but you have dinner and a few sake drinks and a few beers -- that's usually when the real conversation starts.

Q: And if you turn down the invitation to dinner?

A: It's harder to develop a relationship. The relationship is as important as the transaction. So, you can't really do much until you've built a relationship. The bigger relationship to be made, the more energy you put into it.

Q: Are there any cultural factors we should keep in mind at dinner?

A: There are Muslims, Taoists, Buddhists, Christians and other religious groups, so they have a variety of food options. You don't have to be afraid of offending these groups by your food choices. You can sit next to a Muslim and eat pork; you just don't offer him any.

Q: What is the dress code like?

A: Because the weather is hot, the dress is a little cooler and more casual. You don't see folks wearing ties as much. If you are having a formal meeting with a government official, you wear a suit and tie, but you'll take the jacket off very quickly.

Q: Is the country a good place to work?

A: Singaporeans invest heavily in education and infrastructure. The country is centrally located in Asia. It's five hours to China and four hours to India, and not too much further to Japan and other countries. Because of this, the government entices companies to locate here by offering them incentives. To encourage business -- businesses that have a good, strong future -- the government charges low taxes. It's a stable place to have a business.

Q: Is it safe?

A: People joke that it is sterile, but it's a very safe place. If you litter, it's a \$500 fine. If you spit gum on the sidewalk, it's a \$500 fine. If you steal a purse, the sentence is something like 20 years. The country is ruled by a benevolent dictatorship. They create an environment that doesn't take kindly to exceptions. The other day, I was reading an article describing a person who was sentenced to 15 years in jail and five strokes of the cane for graffiti. It's not a police state by any means, but it's one of the safest places.

Q: Final bit of advice?

A: Singaporeans are incredibly proud of their country. Americans will bash their country to each other. They'll say "Obama is horrible," or "Bush is terrible." Don't ever say anything negative about Singapore to a Singaporean.