



WHEN IN RIYADH

In advance of the Irish trade mission to Saudi Arabia and Qatar this April, Lucille Redmond provides brief guide to correct etiquette, compiled with the help of Padraig Fitzpatrick, President - Middle Eastern Operations of Jaguar Capital, and others.

QATAR ETIQUETTE

Doing business in Qatar has many of the same rules of etiquette as Saudi Arabia, but it is more westernised - one in five residents are expatriates and many companies are located there.

You should always be sensitive to Islamic beliefs and customs in your business practices in this Muslim country.

You are required to use a local agent to conduct business in Qatar, unless you have an office there - which can actually be an advantage in a country where networking is important.

Arabic is the national language, but English is widely spoken, especially in business.

Appointments should be made shortly before your visit, as business schedules are frequently changed at short notice. Normal business hours are 8am to noon and 4pm to 7pm. Saturdays to Thursdays, with many offices closed on Fridays. Although you should try to be punctual, your Arabic contacts may arrive a little late.

At meetings, it is good to shake hands with the most senior person first. If you're invited home, greet the oldest person first and most respectfully.

During some meetings in most of the Gulf, you may be offered a small cup of a very bitter coffee. Always accept the first cup and drink it, and return the cup to the pourer after you slightly shake the cup indicating that you had enough. Never put the cup down on the table while drinking, and always receive it with your right hand.

Women are not advised to attend meetings with a male partner.

Gifts are very welcome - price range depends on who you are meeting, but 100 upwards is a good guide.

THIS BRIEF GUIDE TO QATAR ETIQUETTE WAS COMPILED BY LUCILLE REDMOND WITH THE HELP OF ENTERPRISE IRELAND'S SENIOR MARKETING ADVISER, CONSTRUCTION AND ENGINEERING, MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA, AHMAD ALTARAWNEH, AND OTHERS.

SAUDI Arabia can be a minefield for westerners who do not go to the trouble of learning the rules of good manners there. People negotiate differently there. When they say something, it may not mean the same as when a European or American says the same. It is quite easy for a westerner to cause inadvertent unease. Business people are forgiving of foreigners' ignorance - but it does no harm to learn to be mannerly.

If you make a mistake in basic manners, your contact may forgive you for being a stupid foreigner - but the initial offended gasp that he's suppressed won't do you any good. Here are some basics:

GETTING THE DEAL: It is very useful to know a key person in an organization and to receive a personal introduction. In fact, this is essential. Many companies are family-run, so your introducer may be bringing you into his own close circle.

INITIAL PHONE CALLS: Be careful how you schedule phone calls. It is the norm that people pray five times a day. To avoid interrupting prayers, find out before you call what time these are scheduled. The website www.islamicfinder.org gives prayer times for different countries. Greet people in English with "Hello", "Good morning", "Good afternoon", etc. Then introduce yourself - "My name is X and I would like to have a few minutes of your time, please." If it is the first time you are talking to someone, it's useful to outline how you got the name of the person you have called and fill him in briefly on the business activities of your company.

If you have spoken to him previously, some small talk to start with is good. Your home country, the weather, sports are good subjects. It is recommended not to ask specifically after a man's wife, which might offend - though "I hope your family are well" is fine.

Once you have introduced yourself, expand briefly on your company's business activities. Then get down to the purpose of the specific call. Don't chatter. Calm and dignity is valued. An easy and slow, but professional manner is ideal. You may now have a chance to set up a meeting, or it may take a few calls to get to this point. Meetings may be set up a month or some weeks before they happen, though not always. Once the business of the call is over, thank the person for his time and outline your hope and desire to speak with him again, or perhaps to meet.

RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS: Saudi Arabia's business week is Saturday to Wednesday - Thursday and Friday are the weekend. The two most important local holidays are the three days at the end of Ramadan, called Eid-El-Fitr, and the two days that celebrate pilgrims visiting the holy city of Mecca, called Eid Al-Adha. Don't set up a meeting to clash with these dates. (Enterprise Ireland's Middle Eastern offices can help with information on dates, which vary from year to year.)

FORMAL OR CASUAL: Always err on the side of formality. As in so much of life, you'll offend no one with strict good manners, but a casual manner may give inadvertent offence.

THE TRIP: Islamic law applies to you too when you're in Saudi Arabia, so do not bring any pork products, any alcohol or your trusty Bible with you. Leave any religious symbols at home - don't wear a cross on a chain, for instance.

PRESENTS: If you would like to give the person who introduced you a gift, a nice pen or watch is not expected but would be welcomed by a man - especially if it has your company logo. Gifts made in Ireland are very acceptable. If you are a woman giving a gift to a woman, perfume, flowers or chocolates might be nice - but not chocolates with any alcohol in them. Avoid giving expensive gifts, which may embarrass by giving the impression of being an attempt at a bribe. If you do happen to meet people during the Eid holiday, good dates are a nice present.

PUNCTUALITY: Always arrive on time. However, if a Saudi has an appointment to see you, do not be surprised if he is late. Don't be upset; this is part of the culture.

DRINKING: Never drink on the plane before a meeting - this could get you completely barred from doing business in Saudi Arabia.

GREETING: Handshakes are normal between men, but it is better to let the other man initiate this. A warm, firm handshake is preferred. Once people become more familiar with you, they may greet you with air-kisses.

BUSINESS CARDS: If you are offered a business card, treat it with respect - and keep it carefully. It will contain information you can't easily find elsewhere. When you are handed it, accept it with the right hand; it is fine to study it and comment on it.

Your own card should have your name, company, job title, phone number, mobile number, fax number, email address and web address. You should have it translated into Arabic on one side - and make sure your translation is properly done (Enterprise Ireland will give you contacts for this kind of work).

You should have your cards in a briefcase or a business card holder, and they should be handed over using the right hand.

MEETING: Dress formally - suit, shirt and tie if you're a man, and no jewellery - Saudi men themselves wear only a watch, and maybe a wedding ring, and they shun yellow gold, wearing only white gold.

If you're a woman, wear smart, modest business attire covered with an abaya - an all-over robe. Do not remove this, even if you are meeting another businesswoman alone, unless she explicitly invites you to. Don't wear any religious symbols, such as crosses. Men should not take off their jacket during the first meetings, or meetings early in the relationship. But if the business relationship develops and there are more frequent, longer and more work-intensive meetings, it may be acceptable to remove a jacket.

LANGUAGE: It is usual to address people by their first names in business or at home - but it is respectful to prefix the first name with Mr at early meetings - so you'd say Mr Mohammed, for instance, and you might be called Mr Sean if your name is Sean.

If you are dealing with a government minister, the correct form is 'Excellency', and with members of the large royal family - who are often involved in high-level business - 'Your Highness' or 'Your Royal Highness', depending on the branch of the family (again, Enterprise Ireland's representatives will guide you on these matters).

Don't use slang, don't use casual language, don't say anything that is not quite formal. And whatever you do, never swear or blaspheme. Do not mention Israel, and steer clear of politics and religion. If Saudis bring any of these subjects up, it is appropriate to respond - but be aware that they are sensitive subjects. If you have to mention something - for instance if yours is a company that trades with Israel but you would also like to trade with a Saudi company - be respectful of any objections your contacts may have, and state your position as sensitively as possible.

RELIGION IN THE COURSE OF BUSINESS: When people use religious language, be respectful of their comments, acknowledge them and do not

ignore them. It will regularly happen that people break off a business meeting to pray. All you need to do is to let them know you are free to resume the discussion as soon as they return.

BODY LANGUAGE: Don't show the sole of your foot to someone, for instance by sitting awkwardly - it's unlucky, and also rude. Don't have a shirt or blouse gaping to show flesh. Don't point. Don't wave your hands around - and especially don't gesture with your left hand. Thumbs up and down signs can be used.

THE LEFT HAND: Do not use your left hand generally. If you're a ciotóg and must write with your left hand, apologise for this. And whatever you do, don't take or touch food with your left hand. (The left hand is seen as unhygienic, as it is kept for toilet use.) When you are eating, the knife is held in the left hand and the fork in the right.


TECHNOLOGY: It is good to have new technology - Saudis are impressed by that, and are interested in the latest gadgets - talk to them about their own BlackBerry or iPhone too. When making a presentation, though, hold to the middle ground - the presentation should be professional and factual rather than dazzlingly technical.

CURRENCIES: It is fine to talk in riyals - two riyals and fifty hilalas, say; but it is also acceptable to talk in dollars.

DRIVING: Men can hire a car; women have to use taxis - but most businessmen also use taxis. The fares are significantly cheaper than Ireland, and a 10% tip is correct.

DINING OUT: If you are invited for a meal, the host will pay. Don't try to pay - you'll offend him. If you invite, you pay.

IF YOU'RE BROUGHT HOME: If you are invited to someone's home, you can bring a small gift to be passed on to the hostess - who you won't meet - and nice presents for the children are welcomed. A small gift from your own country is appreciated. Take your shoes off in the house (make sure your socks are clean and non-hole!) It is unlikely that you will meet a member of the opposite sex at home - men will entertain in one area of the house and women in another.

In general, people who work successfully in Saudi Arabia behave like diplomats - calm, kind, always tactful and allowing others to make the running. Do that, and you give your business the best chance of success. 

DON'T THEY KNOW IT'S FRIDAY?

CROSS-CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR BUSINESS AND LIFE IN THE GULF

First published back in 1999, and now in its eighth edition, this 128-page handbook is a great little guide to help Westerners get to grips with the nuances of living and doing business in the Gulf. Written by ex-pat Jeremy Williams, it is peppered with amusing anecdotes from over 20 years in the Middle East, including spells as the British Defence Attaché to the UAE and Bahrain. The book also includes chapters on basic Arabic expressions, arranging a marketing visit, entertaining clients and Shariah banking, as well as exploring how expatriates are viewed, the process of getting a driver's licence, attending and/or arranging a meal, food etiquette and determining who pays the bill.

Don't they know it's Friday? is published by Motivate Publishing; ISBN-10: 186063074X.

