

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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