

The Rugby World Cup: A cultural guide to networking effectively

Attending the Rugby World Cup in a business capacity and to network? This must-read guide will help you to navigate its cultural minefield.

The Rugby World Cup is here and for savvy business people it will provide a huge opportunity, not just for sporting fun, but for some serious networking – providing, that is, you can navigate a cultural minefield of 20 nationalities in the pre-match bar.

Cultural differences are reflected in sport just as they are in business and day-to-day life. The Rugby World Cup will be a time of national pride and sports fever, but also a nod to the importance rugby has played in the heritage of many countries – from the class-based society of old England, to the historical roots of apartheid and the reunification of South Africa.

Not only will we see sporting prowess on the field, but off it there is exceptional opportunity to build relationships with business people from around the globe. The impressive array of sponsors including Heineken, MasterCard and Emirates highlight the business prestige associated with the tournament.

So where will the networking take place? Well, we all know that what happens on the field is the second most important thing to happen at the Rugby World Cup ... the first is what goes on in the bar before and after each match!

However, even with all of that good intention, the melting pot of different cultures and nationalities can make for confusing times.

Here is our guide to surviving and thriving if you choose to attend any of the 48 matches in a business capacity:

How do you greet different nationalities?

Greetings differ around the world. Do you kiss or shake hands? And if you kiss, how many times? First impressions are made in the first few seconds of meeting someone, so be prepared ...

Kissing – It's not uncommon for people from Italy or France to greet each other with a kiss – although they probably won't if meeting for the first time. After meeting, it's a kiss on each cheek starting with the left. Avoid kisses for fans from Asia – where it is viewed as an intimate act and often not permissible in public.

Handshakes – For Americans and those from the U.K., a handshake is good. But be careful about your grip – gripping too tight can be seen as aggressive in many cultures.

Showing respect – Be prepared for Japanese fans to not look you directly in the eye to start with – eye contact can be seen as a sign of disrespect and a challenge in African and Asian cultures. If you are greeting a Japanese person who is older, nodding your head is an effective way to show deference. You should also ensure that you show respect if people from New Zealand or any of the Pacific rugby nations indulge in a pre-game war dance (Haka). This is not just a bit of pre-match fun, but a matter of real national pride and identity.

What are the cultural differences between how different nationalities behave when having a drink?

Different cultures approach social drinking very differently. Growing up in England I was always aware of the importance of “standing your round.” This speaks to the cultural importance of fair play within British culture and taking turns. The concept of buying drinks for the group is also immersed in Australian culture where you similarly buy a “round” or a “shout.”

In Japanese culture, you cannot have a drink that isn't full – you should keep your companions' drinks filled to the brim and they will do the same for you. So if you want to see the kick-off, be mindful of not drinking too quickly as your glass will be topped up!

Beware of how tactile you are, too. A friendly touch on the arm during conversation is common for people in France, Italy and Russia – but can be uncomfortable and overly-familiar for those in Northern Europe, the USA and Japan.

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Different language – verbal and non-verbal

If the eyes are the windows to the soul, then language is the window to the soul of a country.

Colloquial phrases can give you a clue to what that country values. For example, the phrase “an Englishman's home is his castle,” which shows we value privacy and a small select group of friends and family.

Not all language is verbal, though. Take some notice of the following:

Body language – Be aware of reading body language – it differs across cultures. Nods of the head from Japanese businessmen or women during conversation don't necessarily mean you've sealed the deal, but can merely be a sign of politeness and wanting to avoid saying “no.”

Hand gestures – The meaning of hand gestures varies across cultures and can potentially lead to a web of tangled, confused interactions. For instance, the American “goodbye” wave can be interpreted in many parts of Europe and Latin America as the signal for “no.” While the Italian “goodbye” wave can be interpreted by Americans as the gesture for “come here.” To make matters even more complicated, the American “come here” can be seen as an insult in Asian countries, where they use it for calling an animal. The signal for “OK” in the U.K. is a sexual insult in Georgia, means “zero” in France and “coins” in Japan.

Celebrating – Jubilant Americans should avoid the “devil horns” hand gesture frequently seen at rock concerts and Texas Longhorn American football matches. This is an offensive gesture in many parts of the world, including Africa – in Italy it tells a man that other men are sleeping with his wife! Even a “thumbs up” can be misinterpreted. In some cultures, including Australia, it is used to mean “up yours” rather than “well done.”

How do different nationalities celebrate or show emotion?

Some cultures are very exuberant in celebration and some consider animated conversation to be a core part of social discourse. While others see a more muted response to be appropriate. So be aware, know what to expect and don't take offense. We all do things differently.

With a bit of understanding and some cultural education, the Rugby World Cup bar could prove to be a very fruitful place for business – and for pleasure!

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