

Middle East: meetings and first contacts

It has been well-known, even before the Mohammed caricatures brought it to the public focus again: the relationship between Europe and the orient skates on thin ice. If you don't consider cultural differences and religious feelings, relationships often fail before they even started. Yet, the orient remains a very interesting business partner for European companies. Dr. Sylvia Ortlieb, orient specialist with more than 20 years experience, has published a new book that advises companies and individuals how to conduct successful business in the Middle East.

By Dr. Sylvia Ortlieb

In Europe, it is possible - and not unusual - to conduct business solely through correspondence and phone conversation. Things look different in the Arab world, where this way of conducting business is rarely successful. The Arab culture is relationship-focused and personal contacts have top priority. Getting to know each other in person is paramount, conducting business comes in second. Simply sending a letter or making a few phone calls and to hope that this will lead to the signing of a contract is by far not enough. In fact,

the biggest mistake a beginner can make is to try to catch a potential Arab business partner's attention by just sending an email. Although technically email communication hardly causes any problems in the big cities, an email as a means of initial contact is frequently deleted and the business proposal is doomed to failure at the outset. Once contact has been established, however, emails can fulfil their function as a comfortable communication medium and can be used successfully with Arab business partners.

There is nothing in the Arab world that could replace personal contact. Therefore, the most

promising hierarchy for establishing contact is the following: personal contact followed by phone conversation with correspondence coming in last. With regard to written communication letters and faxes are more appreciated than emails. In order to avoid that your letters get classified as "snail mail" and take several weeks to reach your business partner, do send your letters by express mail. When sending mail it is usually a good idea to inform your business partner by fax about the incoming mail. Personal visits of your Arab business associates are almost taken for granted. Thus, you should visit your partner not only at the beginning of



The skyline of Dubai

photo: Sylvia Ortlieb

your business relationship but also on a regular basis - every few months - afterwards. You have probably arranged the first meetings before your actual business trip to the Middle East. Plan various visits with different partners, leave enough time between individual meetings and anticipate, that only the first meeting in the morning will take place on time. Delays and rescheduling are common. If you plan more than three meetings during a day, you will have no leeway to adjust your schedule. An overly tight schedule can be crushed entirely due to frequent rescheduling and can cause you to achieve less than with a more moderate program.

Follow-up is king

Once you have established an initial contact during a conversation with a company representative at a trade fair, it is expected that you will contact the company within three days to reemphasize your interest in establishing a business relationship.

A brief phone conversation, in which you express how pleased you were about getting to know your counterpart and how much you enjoyed your conversation with him is sufficient to avoid being forgotten by your Arab partner. But if you contact him only after several weeks, because you were busy with day-to-day business and its countless demands, you should not be surprised if your Arab partner can barely remember you and has little interest in a business relationship. From Morocco to Oman, the two key requirements for establishing a solid basis for business are: keep in touch and continually signal interest.

The chambers of foreign trade in the individual Arab countries can assist in establishing contacts with companies that may be interested in your products and services. Another possibility is to participate in a delegation journey conducted by well-respected organizations such as the German-Arab Association (Deutsch-Arabisches Gesellschaft – DAG), and the chambers of foreign trade. Some German federal states such as Bavaria, offer company representatives to join trade delegation visits to Arab countries, which provide direct contacts to relevant government representatives and local companies. The meetings with Arab business partners then serve to clarify to which extent and on what scale common projects could be considered. If

you want to avoid spending time with contacting numerous potential business partners yourself, joining a trade delegation is a very good opportunity. At first glance, it may appear time-consuming and certainly more expensive than sending a company catalog by mail. But in fact it is a much more effective strategy, in particular in view of “golden” opportunities that are available through qualified assistance. Not to forget the respect you gain when travelling as part of an official delegation led by a well-known organization or even a minister, especially in Arab countries where status and hierarchy are crucial factors for establishing a business relationship. Of course, even when travelling as part of an official delegation, it is not enough to simply collect and file business cards. Rather, you will also have to re-work your first meeting preferably by writing a brief summary of what has already been agreed upon and then contacting your business partner by phone to discuss the next steps to be taken. For personal contacts which were established at trade fairs, the following time schedule for preparing a visit to the business partner has proven successful:

Six to eight weeks prior to departure, you should announce your visit, set up a meeting and confirm it in writing. Four weeks prior to the meeting is a good time to confirm agreements and to express how much you look forward to the upcoming meeting. After that reminders should be performed by phone every two weeks, and in the final week before the meeting every two to three days. Please keep in mind to not call on a Friday, as this is the

official Islamic day of rest. Your phone calls can be short, their main objective is to signal continuous interest and to ensure that the meeting is still taking place. It is not unusual that Arabs cancel meetings at short notice, especially in the Gulf states.

Diwaniyye

In the Gulf states another possibility to present one's project is the sheikh's office hour, the so-called “diwaniyye”. It usually takes place five days a week at a particular time. Traditionally the sheikh uses this time to settle conflicts among families or individual tribes. Together with other aspirants and locals you may present your request to the sheikh. Men can attend without prior appointment, while women have to be invited by the sheikh. You can obtain detailed information such as the time and place of these meetings by contacting the local chamber of foreign trade.

THE GERMAN-ARAB ASSOCIATION

The primary goal of the German-Arab Association is to facilitate and enhance the continuous expansion of German-Arab friendship. The non-profit organization, founded in 1966, is a German institution, which has devoted itself to secure deeper political, social and scientific relations between Germany and the Arab world, while strengthening the scope of cultural exchange.



Sylvia Ortlieb holds a PhD in political science and cultural anthropology, and has specialized in the orient for more than 20 years. She works as a scientific advisor for the German-Arab Association and is the managing direc-

tor of the consulting firm Orient Occident.
info@orient-occident.de
www.orient-occident.de



Sylvia Ortlieb
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