

Sociologists classify countries and cultures into two broad groups - "low context" and "high context". In low-context societies (Western societies such as New Zealand are generally considered low-context) verbal communication is usually direct.

Raymond Cohen, a respected researcher on culture and negotiation, has stated that the freedom of the individual lies at the heart of communication in low-context societies such as New Zealand. India, on the other hand (along with many other Asian societies) is a classic example of a high-context society – where group harmony is of utmost importance.

This defining norm of Indian society shapes many facets of Indian culture, and mastering the nuances of culture is of paramount importance to successfully doing business in India. Further, India is a fairly hierarchical society and hierarchy plays a key role in business interactions. Here are ten areas to consider:

1. **Hierarchy:** First and foremost, knowing the position of the person one is dealing with is vitally important, particularly in assessing their ability to "commit" and "carry through the commitment". This facet directly informs communicating with a group, including greeting a group (more often than not, one will be dealing with a group rather than an individual). So, when entering a meeting room, it is highly recommended that you approach and greet the most senior figure first.
2. **Greeting and Language:** Choice of greeting and language is also an important cultural factor. Please be aware of the greatest urban myth about language in India - i.e. everyone speaks Hindi. Unfortunately, that is not true. Hindi is just the official (not national) language (and, by the way, Hindu is not a language but a person who has Hinduism as a religion!). So while "Namaste" is perfectly fine in the North, a "Namoskar" may be more appropriate in the East, and standard English greetings are perfectly fine in the South and West and certainly in the North-East. When addressing an Indian whom you do not know personally, always use the appropriate formal title, whether Professor, Doctor, Mr, Mrs or if you do not know their names then Sir or Madam will suffice.

3. **Email, SMS or Talk:** Indians love to talk and mobile calls are dirt cheap, so there is an expectation that you will talk often and talk for a long time. Talking comes at the expense of the written word. Do not be offended if the email does not bring a written reply but an oral reply or a sms reply – via the mobile phone of course. Topics of conversation – anything will go. However religion, Pakistan, Kashmir and poverty are best avoided, try cricket and Bollywood instead.
4. **No noes:** People in India dislike direct confrontation and for the most part avoid expressing a clear "no." This means that one has to look for words and phrases that in effect say "NO". The notion of "losing face" is very significant in Indian culture. Please take extreme care to ensure that your actions do not cause a loss of face for a person – particularly in group situations. At the extreme, being humiliated (or seen to be) before a group can be considered quite dire. So at all costs make sure that you do not cause your business counterpart to lose face!
5. **Handshake versus Namaste:** Handshake is an acceptable gesture, particularly in most urban centres. One may like to combine that with the Namaste (which literally means I bow to you) – so do a Namaste and then shake hands if the non-verbal cue indicates so. In urban India, it is perfectly fine to shake hands with women as well, unless the non-verbal cue says otherwise. A male-male hug is not recommended, nor a kiss on the cheek of a woman – even if you know the woman very well.
6. **Business cards:** Business cards should be exchanged at the first meeting. It is neither necessary nor expected to have a Hindi translation of your business card – Hindi is only the official language by constitution. Cards should be handled with respect – not chucked across the table! Have lots of business cards on hand. Do not assume that the mobile phone number of your counterpart will be on the card – check for it and ask for it if it is not there – the answer may give you a cue of how well your relationship is going!



7. **Meetings:** Meetings should be arranged well in advance. This should be done in writing (email) and confirmed by phone closer to time – probably no earlier than one week beforehand. Avoid meetings near or on national and regional/state holidays. However expect meetings, particularly with the senior most people to change at the last moment. Dinner appointments for business purposes are rare. Official dinners are mostly hosted as large gatherings, and are mainly meant for socialising and getting to know each other. Business over lunch is quite popular, breakfast meeting can often happen without the breakfast. Indians are born multi-taskers and be prepared for some distractions/ disturbances during the meeting, e.g., a few phone calls. One must appreciate that such behaviour/occurrences do not show a lack of interest or attention but is merely a function of operating under constraints and demands completely unknown to most New Zealanders. Similarly, it is not unusual for multiple discussions to carry on simultaneously in meetings, and for some of the discussions to be noisy or robust. While this can at first be quite disconcerting and even frustrating, it is often an essential part of reaching consensus and conclusions.
8. **Negotiations:** If your business dealings in India involve negotiations, always bear in mind that they can be slow. Decisions are always made at the highest level. If the owner or Director of the company is not present, the chances are these are early stage negotiations. Indians do not base their business decisions solely on statistics, empirical data and exciting PowerPoint presentations. They use intuition, feeling and faith to guide them, so patience is required and anger is a no-no. Be non-confrontational and when criticising or disagreeing, do so very sensitively and diplomatically. Note that the Indian psyche operates around the overall context. Therefore, one should be prepared for questions and enquiries, which may not seem to be directly related to the subject. To people coming from more deductive cultures (such as New Zealand), this behaviour often appears to indicate a lack of focus and be wasteful – however this is not true. Finally, bargaining is the life blood of negotiations in India – be prepared for the bottom line after the bottom line and the need to "adjust" for changing circumstances. At all costs, avoid being inflexible – take a cue from them and keep exploring.

9. **Food:** Most westerners assume that India is a vegetarian country and that most Indians do not drink alcohol. This is simply not true. In 2006, a comprehensive study reported that only 31 per cent of Indians are vegetarians. The findings also showed that vegetarianism is a function of inherited cultural practice rather than individual belief. Religion and community do matter: as many as 55 per cent of Brahmins (upper caste Hindus) are vegetarians (but then 45% are not!). The majority of all Hindus are non-vegetarian. Non-vegetarians can be vegetarians during certain days of the week or certain parts of the year. Just ask if you're hosting Indian people for a business or social meal about their dietary preferences.

10. **Alcohol:** India does not allow any public advertising for alcohol but they do drink quite a bit of alcohol. However sometimes, some people drink alcohol at some places and then at other times the same people do not drink alcohol at a different place or in the presence of some people! Alcohol is typically taken before and not with a meal – the wine culture is growing fast but it is a beer and spirits country still. The best way to handle the issue is to ask “what would you like to drink?” rather than “would you like a glass of wine or beer?”



India

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Highly Recommended reading:

Perceptions of New Zealand in India: Produced by New Zealand Trade and Enterprise, available on NZTE website.