

# GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

TO LOCAL, INTERNATIONAL & LIFESTYLE REAL ESTATE



## CIPS

Certified International Property Specialist

## > CROSS-CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

# View the World through Your Clients' Eyes

One common quality among real estate professionals who pursue the CIPS designation is a keen interest in connecting to clients and other agents from other countries. When societies interact, there are abundant opportunities to learn and grow—and to make mistakes.

**Avoiding mistakes is not as simple as having an open mind.** As a global agent, you must go out of your way to *learn* the many different ways your culture differs from your clients'.

It's also tempting to believe that respecting individual differences is sufficient. After all, you've already learned how to navigate a wide range of temperaments and personalities among clients in your local market. Isn't that a transferable skill?

Not entirely. A person's culture is different from their personality. **Culture is an indisputable lens that significantly impacts the way people see the world, choose their actions, and interpret others' behavior.**

Don't ignore cultural differences, but be cautious about generalizations that might inadvertently slip into negative stereotypes.

If clients from other cultures are given respect and appreciation, global agents are much more capable of predicting their behavior, clarifying their motivations, avoiding giving offense, and identifying common ground.

Look inside this issue of *Global Perspectives* for fresh thinking and practical tips on working successfully with clients and other real estate professionals from around the world. 🌍



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# Communication Clashes



## Pick the Right Platform

Instant messaging is used around the world, but not everyone communicates on the same platforms. Make sure you're in synch with your clients, who may prefer these number-one messenger apps.

Source: SimilarWeb



### WhatsApp

Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Mexico, Spain, U.K.



### Messenger

Australia, Canada, U.S.



### WeChat

China



### Line

Japan

Imagine you just got off the phone with a new client from another country who is interested in purchasing property in your market. Should you follow up with an email summary of your conversation, confirming "next steps" and including the usual forms for onboarding new clients?

## Communicating across cultures

American anthropologist Edward Hall introduced the theory of high- and low-context cultures—a topic explored in the CIPS designation coursework. His terminology has been adopted and reinterpreted by many other cross-cultural experts.

Regarding communication preferences, every culture falls somewhere along a continuum. At each end of the spectrum:

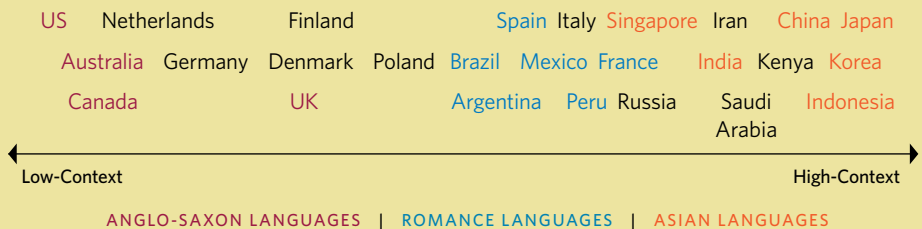
**In low-context cultures**, the emphasis is on the written or spoken word. Messages are expressed and understood at face value.

Examples: United States, Canada, Germany

**In high-context cultures**, messages rely heavily on contextual cues. Good communication is sophisticated, nuanced, and layered.

Examples: Japan, China, Korea

## Communicating



Source: The Culture Map by Erin Meyer

If your client comes from a low-context culture, they are more likely to appreciate—even expect—a detailed follow-up email, confirming key discussion points. On the other hand, a client from a high-context culture might find such messages insulting—because you're restating the obvious and may be implying that you don't trust them.

Neither approach is better or worse, nor is it appropriate to make assumptions. However, differences do exist. If you view every international client through your own unique cultural lens, you're bound to encounter occasional misunderstandings.



## What determines where a culture falls on the spectrum?

Many factors play a role, but two of the most significant determinants are:

### 1. Language

If you speak more than one language, you probably appreciate how different languages can be. For example, in some languages, one word has multiple and similar meanings. The only way to know which definition is intended is to understand how to interpret various clues.

On the other hand, if a language is rich in words (imagine a very thick thesaurus), it's easier to select which word, among many similar options, precisely expresses your intentions.

### 2. Shared history

Is it easier to understand a new acquaintance from another country or a spouse you've known for decades? Of course, misunderstandings can occur between any two people. However, if you've spent a lot of time together and shared many similar experiences, it's easier to pick up on subtle intentions and unspoken messages. The same is true for the dominant communication style of a given culture.

High-context communication is harder to achieve when the population originates from different backgrounds that have been in contact for less time. It's more important to be explicit in your communications to avoid misunderstandings.

Consider the two countries sitting at opposite ends of the communication continuum:

#### U.S. = Lowest-context culture

Has the greatest diversity in language and ethnicity, with the shortest shared history.

#### Japan = Highest-context culture

A highly homogenous population sharing thousands of years of closely knit history.

## It's all relative

A culture's placement on the communication spectrum is much less important than the relative placement of two different cultures. Before working with clients from a different culture, consider whether their communication style is higher- or lower-context than your own.

For example, the United Kingdom and the United States share a language and friendly international relationships. You'd think misunderstandings are rare. However, the U.K. is a higher-context culture than the U.S., which may create occasional communication challenges.

Sometimes, when humor enters conversations, the differences in U.K. and U.S. communication styles become evident. The British are quite fond of deadpan sarcasm, which can leave a U.S. agent suspicious that their U.K. client is joking, but reluctant to laugh and risk insulting the client. In turn, the U.K. client may sigh, presuming the agent lacks a sense of humor, oblivious to the agent's concerns about exhibiting polite behavior.

## East versus West

Consider China. It's a vast country with substantial regional and generational differences. However, as a culture sitting at the high-context end of the spectrum, business is conducted differently than in Anglo-Saxon cultures, or even French, Spanish, or Mexican cultures.

If a Chinese client expresses an idea or an opinion, the real message may only be implied. Your client may expect you to take an active role in deciphering the message and creating shared meaning. This communication style may come easily to Chinese agents but could confuse agents from other cultures.

Remember, never rely on cultural stereotypes, but do learn about the underlying dynamics that influence cultural conditioning. It's an excellent first step in building awareness of your own cultural lens—and how it may differ from your clients'. 🌐



## Avoid Gestures

Nonverbal communications also vary by culture. For example:

**U.S. = "okay"**

**Japan = "money"**

**France = "zero" or "worthless"**

Implies various insults in Brazil, Germany, Russia, Turkey, Venezuela, and elsewhere.

### EMOTICON ALERT!

Steer clear of emoticons in cross-cultural communications, which are just as risky as hand gestures.





# Calendar Conundrums

**Scenario:** A U.S. real estate agent in Newport, Rhode Island, expects a client from Brazil to arrive at his office at 10:00 am to tour three properties with him and discuss next steps over lunch. By the time the client arrives, 40 minutes late, the agent is already worried about their noon reservation. While touring the homes, the client takes three calls, creating additional delays.

Cultural differences aren't limited to communication styles. Perceptions of time—and how those perceptions impact scheduling and planning—may also trigger cross-cultural confusion and frustration.

In some cultures, like Germany and Switzerland, things tend to go according to plan, including precision train departures and arrivals. Generally speaking, it's in bad form to show up late for an appointment, since one delay impacts the next commitment, and the next.

In other cultures, especially in developing nations, it's broadly accepted that change is constant. Traffic delays and other disruptions are common. Everyone is accustomed to dealing with unexpected circumstances.

## Linear- versus flexible-time

Among cross-culturalists who study business scheduling preferences, Erin Meyer places countries along a scheduling scale, ranging from linear-time to flexible-time. In her model:

### LINEAR-TIME

Project steps are approached in sequence. One thing at a time. No interruptions. The focus is on deadlines and sticking to a schedule. Promptness and good organization are more important than flexibility.

### Scheduling



Source: *The Culture Map* by Erin Meyer

### FLEXIBLE-TIME

Project steps are approached fluidly, adjusting as opportunities arise. Many things are dealt with simultaneously, and interruptions are accepted. Adaptability and flexibility are more important than organization.



## “How late is late? It all depends. Each culture has its subtle conventions.”

The countries on Meyer’s scheduling continuum can be organized into four broad groups:

1. **Germanic, Anglo-Saxon, and Northern European** cultures generally prefer linear-time. With strong roots in these cultures, the United States also skews to the linear side.
2. Latin cultures, both **Latin European** and **Latin American**, tend to operate on the flexible-time side of the scale.
3. **Middle Eastern** and **African** cultures exhibit some of the strongest preferences for flexible-time.
4. **Asian** cultures are scattered across the scale: Japan prefers linear-time, whereas China and India practice flexible-time.

As a business consultant, Meyer helps cross-cultural organizations understand and work together more effectively. Global real estate agents may also find it helpful to understand these cultural preferences, especially when traveling to another country.

How late is late? It all depends. Each culture has its subtle conventions. Do as much research as possible, rely on experience to make appropriate adjustments, and don’t make negative assumptions.

Interestingly, the scheduling dimension impacts much more than timeliness for appointments. It also affects other interpersonal dynamics, including how meetings are run (with formal agendas versus impromptu discussions) and how people form lines (in a strict queue versus a looser funnel of traffic).

### What influences the clock?

History plays an essential role in some cultural scheduling preferences. In highly industrialized nations, for example, business practices have adopted the linear processes initially employed in factories, where workflow interruptions literally resulted in time-equals-money problems.


In other cultures, personal relationships are the primary driver of time and scheduling decisions. Where relationships come first, the clock takes second place. For example, a client from a relationship-based culture could easily feel insulted if you cut a meeting short, due to another commitment.

Interestingly, when viewed on a map, many side-by-side countries share cultural similarities, but the shifts at borders can be dramatic. For example, regarding scheduling preferences, compare Switzerland, a country where clock-making is practically a national symbol, to Italy, with its casual Mediterranean influences.

### Adapting your style

Even though differences in scheduling styles may create conflicts, for most global agents, it’s relatively easy to adjust and accommodate clients, whether you’re moving to the right or the left of your scheduling preference.

In the case of the U.S. agent mentioned earlier, it turned out his client from Brazil had already contacted the restaurant and pushed the lunch reservation back an hour because he recognized the importance of timeliness at U.S. restaurants.

The agent was late for his afternoon commitments, but now he understands that some clients operate on different scheduling assumptions. He does his best to keep his calendar open and flexible, giving himself time to focus on cultivating personal relationships with clients who place a high priority on this aspect of the transaction. 



CULTURAL CONDITIONING IMPACTS

*What we*  
SEE, THINK,  
AND DO

# Building Bridges

Success as a global real estate professional requires sensitivity to cultural differences, without turning generalizations into harmful stereotypes. Learn as much as you can, then act with sincerity and respect.

## Peaches versus Coconuts

There are significant cultural differences in how quickly individuals are willing to open up to one another, including what is considered public versus private information. To understand the differences, consider “peach” versus “coconut” cultures, a theory developed by social scientist Kurt Lewin.

People from the U.S., for example, are very comfortable smiling at strangers and engaging in personal conversations with new acquaintances. It’s a peach culture, where it’s quite normal to be chatty and open—people are frequently “soft” during initial contact.

Beyond pleasant public interactions, however, members of peach cultures still protect their private selves—the hard pit in the middle. In addition to the U.S., other examples of peach cultures are Mexico, Brazil, and Chile.

This behavior can be quite unsettling to members of coconut cultures, which are “harder” to penetrate from the outset. Private topics are reserved for close relationships after trust is formed. Switzerland, Russia, Germany, and Sweden are all examples of coconut cultures.

If you’re from a peach culture, understand that someone from a coconut culture may view your open, friendly style as inappropriate, or an attempt at trickery. It’s not that coconut cultures aren’t willing to cultivate warm relationships—it just takes time and respect.

## Small Talk

Peaches and coconuts aside, face-to-face networking at receptions is an essential aspect of cultivating global business, especially for CIPS designees interested in meeting real estate professionals from other cultures and attending various international events.

Regarding cocktail receptions, consider these observations from consultant and social theorist Richard Lewis, drawn from his book, *When Cultures Collide: Leading Across Cultures*:

**Chinese and Russians**, more accustomed to large seated dinners, are often less comfortable shuffling around from group to group of noisy strangers.

**Americans**, with their mobile nature and easy social manners, typically excel at small talk.

**Australians** and **Canadians** are often familiar with formulating strategies for meeting new arrivals, which makes cocktail conversation easier.



The **British** and the **French** are long-time experts in small talk at receptions.

The **Japanese**, masters of polite trivia among themselves, may feel less confident engaging in similar small talk with foreigners.

**Germans** are very willing to have long, soul-searching conversations with close friends, but see little point in trivialities and platitudes with complete strangers.

**Mexicans, Peruvians, Argentinians** and **other Latin American** cultures “never run out of steam” at cocktail gatherings.

Of course, you should never assume that Lewis’ interpretations of cultural differences are “absolutes” that apply equally to every member of a culture. To the contrary, it’s much more important to appreciate that every person is shaped by their culture—and there is much to learn and celebrate in these differences.

## Silence

While receptions lend themselves to non-stop chatter, silence is another aspect of cross-cultural communication that warrants closer examination. Writing for RW3 CultureWizard, Carrie Shearer explains the difference between silence in “speaking cultures” versus “listening cultures.”

**Listening cultures** include Asian and Nordic countries, where silence denotes careful thought. In these cultures, conversational pauses keep the exchange calm, or may be used to help everyone to save face.

**Speaking cultures**, including many Western countries, see silence as a lack of engagement in the conversation or even disagreement. Members of these cultures may jump in to fill the silence and ease their discomfort.

On top of these fundamental differences, it can be challenging to decode silence in various situations. For example, if the senior member of a Japanese group closes his eyes during a presentation, it may signal agreement with the speaker—or an unwillingness to publicly disagree.

What’s the best way to handle the situation? Shearer recommends slowing down your speech, streamlining any complicated language, and avoiding idioms. You might then try asking a question to confirm understanding.

Keep in mind how difficult it is to speak or write in a language not used on a daily basis. Clients may need time to consider a question, frame an answer, and translate their thoughts before responding. Silence also plays a role in hierarchical cultures, where the senior or oldest person does the talking and others are expected to remain silent unless asked to contribute or corroborate information.

## Listening

Communication is a two-way street, requiring solid speaking and listening skills. In cross-cultural interactions, the listening side of the equation is particularly indispensable.

Some cultures are instinctively better listeners than others. When cultures cross, everyone benefits from active listening skills. Pay careful attention to what is said, what isn’t said, and other non-verbal cues.

Active listening takes effort and practice, but it’s the best way to enjoy the many rewards of interacting with other cultures and cultivating a global real estate practice. 🌍

## [TIP]

**IF YOU WORK ON A TEAM,** make sure clients from high-context cultures have opportunities to meet and grow comfortable with everyone who will play a role in the transaction.



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CROSS-CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

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CIPS

**REMINDER**

## It's Time to Renew Your Dues!

The CIPS Network is stronger than ever. In the private Facebook group, designees have exchanged **350 referral opportunities in 62 countries in the past 12 months.**

The CIPS Network is larger than ever. Membership increased by a **record number of 886** new designees in 2018, bringing the total to **over 4,100 designees world-wide.**



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