

Doing Business in Italy

ADVANCED

The majority of our clients at CEC have business partners or contact with Italians. The concerns are usually the same: *the Italians' English is poor. They're slow in responding. They're easily offended. We've decided to give you some basic tips on dealing with Italians; but for more details we recommend asking about our cross-cultural seminars!*

Punctuality and Business Hours

Italians have a bad reputation for „always being at a coffee break.“ So here are a few pointers on the best times to make appointments when doing business in Italy: Northern Italy business hours are usually 8.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. and then 3.30 p.m. to 6.30 p.m. In central and southern Italy, your best bet is 8.30 to 12.45 and then 4.30...or maybe 5p.m. until 7.30 or 8 p.m. The pace, obviously, is less intense. Lunch breaks in bigger cities is usually two hours long (from 1.30 to 3.30 p.m.). Generally, all of Italy is on holiday in the month of August. Punctuality is not a priority. In fact, Italy enjoys one of the longest „foreplay“ times before a meeting than any other country! In other words, it takes a long, long time before one gets down to business in Italy.



Dressing for Business

Although punctuality to your business appointments are relaxed and unimportant, dressing is a huge priority. Italians love style, beauty, and class. They will judge you on what you wear and have no qualms in doing so. In fact, they find it absolutely nor-



mal to be so judgmental when it comes to style. Most countries have a saying: „You are what you eat.“ Sound reasonable, right? Italians say, „You are what you wear.“ Formal dress in business and social situations and style are key. Men should wear expensive ties and well-cut dark suits; women dress simply but with elegance. Accessorizing for both sexes are widely practiced.

Making Small Talk

Like in France, there is rarely a silent moment when among Italians. They are sociable people. Welcome topics include architecture, arts and films, sports (especially soccer/football), food and wine. Of course, all of these things should be talked about as they relate to Italy. Topics to avoid: the Vatican, the Mafia, politics and corruption, and anything else that may bruise the Italian's ego.

At the Negotiating Table

Most Italians do not speak English very well, so you may want an interpreter. Italians generally prefer to do business with the most important person in your organization. Italians follow a special form of decorum and even have a phrase for it: „La bella Figura“. Formality, diplomacy, and eloquent manners are all in your best interest. It may seem a bit all too dignified perhaps for those from more relaxed cultures, but it is best to study up on a few behavioral aspects of your Italian counterparts, and „when in Rome, do as the Romans do.“ However, Italians are receptive to new ideas and imaginative in general. Lastly, as with your dress, all of the materials you present to your business partner should be stylish and well-designed.

***Editor's Note:** Although LEO is one of the most popular online dictionaries for German-English-German needs, it is not the end-all nor the best resource. Dict.cc is another good resource and sometimes more accurate, especially with industry-specific terminology. Also, the online tools that are available (Babelfish or Google) are never as good as professional translators and should never be used in lieu of writing emails or letters yourself! If you want to see what your English would look like after plugging your German into a translation tool, just take an English text from your homepage and have it translated into German. You'll quickly find out that online translation tools are only good for getting an idea of the content.