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WHEN INNOVATION MEETS GROWTH



THE BUSINESS OF MEDTECH

The Business Deal Starts Before the Meeting: Food, Dress Codes and Respect in Asia

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The Business Deal Starts Before the Meeting: Food, Dress Codes and Respect in Asia

Travelling through China right now, I am reminded almost every day that the most important part of a business meeting often happens before anyone opens a laptop.

Over more than 30 years of living, working and travelling across Asia, I have spent a great deal of time in hospital boardrooms, distributor offices and conference halls. But when I think back on the relationships that actually turned into long-term business, many of them did not begin with a presentation. They began over a meal, a cup of tea, a careful exchange of business cards or a small gesture that showed I had taken the time to understand where I was.

In my last two articles, I wrote about why Asia is not one market and why hospitals that say they want innovation can be so reluctant to adopt it. This time I want to talk about something that rarely appears in a market-entry plan, but that can decide whether you ever get the chance to present one.

Food, dress codes and respect.

Asia does not have one set of manners

Let me start with the same warning I gave in my first article. There is no single Asian etiquette.

What is polite in Tokyo may feel stiff in Bangkok. What is perfectly normal at a dinner table in Shanghai may be inappropriate in Jakarta. India alone has more variety in food, language and custom than many continents. Whether a handshake is expected, whether alcohol is offered, who sits where and who speaks first can all change when you cross a border, and sometimes when you simply move from one city to another.

So I am not going to give you a rulebook. I have lived in India and worked across China and nearly 30 other Asian countries, and I still get things wrong. What I can share is what I have learned to pay attention to.

The visitor who arrives with a list of rules is usually better prepared than the visitor who arrives with none. But the visitor who arrives curious, and willing to watch and listen, is better prepared than both.

The meal is part of the meeting

I grew up in Durban, South Africa, home to one of the largest Indian communities outside India. I spent time in the homes of Indian friends, I developed a lifelong love of curry, and I learned early that when someone shares their food with you, they are sharing something they are proud of.

That lesson has followed me right across Asia.

When your hosts take you to dinner, they are not simply feeding you. They are welcoming you, and in many cases they are also getting to know you. How you behave at the table tells them a great deal about how you will behave as a partner. Are you curious or dismissive? Patient or in a hurry? Interested in them, or only in the deal?

My advice has always been the same. Eat local. Do not ask for Western food when your hosts have chosen something they are proud of. You do not have to finish every dish at full strength, and nobody expects you to, but you should show interest and enjoy it. A polite refusal followed by a request for something familiar can say more about your attitude than any presentation.

Some of the most valuable conversations I have had in Asia happened over late dinners, long after the formal meetings had ended. People relax. They talk about their families, their hospitals, their frustrations and their ambitions. You learn who really makes decisions, what worries them and what they actually need. None of that appears in a tender document.

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Dining customs also carry real boundaries. In a Muslim-majority country such as Indonesia, respecting dining customs means no pork, and you should be thoughtful about alcohol. In India, many of your hosts may be vegetarian, but that does not mean all vegetarian food is the same. Jainism often asks for a stricter diet still: no meat, no eggs, and often no root vegetables such as onion or garlic. If you are the one hosting, these things matter even more. Getting them wrong will not necessarily cost you the deal, but it tells your hosts that you did not think about them before you arrived.

Dress as who you are

Dress codes are another area where good intentions can go wrong.

In my experience, a first meeting with a hospital executive, a senior physician or a government official in Asia is still a formal occasion. Turning up underdressed, or dressed as if you are on holiday, can be read as a lack of seriousness, however friendly the conversation turns out to be. It is always easier to take off a jacket than to explain why you did not bring one.

But I have seen the opposite mistake many times too. Westerners arrive in India, or elsewhere in Asia, and start wearing local clothes as if that will make them part of the culture. It rarely does. You are a visitor, and pretending to be something else does not show respect. To many people it looks a little funny, and sometimes a little disrespectful.

If your hosts themselves invite you to wear something for a special occasion, that is an invitation, and accepting it graciously is a different thing altogether. But on an ordinary business day, dress as the professional you are, and let your interest in the country show in everything else.

Respect is not shown in a costume. It is shown in how you listen, how you behave and how seriously you take the people across the table.

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Small gestures carry a lot of weight

In June 2021, I joined a healthcare delegation to Japan. The structure of each visit was almost the same. There were opening remarks, then the Japanese host presented itself, then each visiting company had a short pitch, and only after that came networking and the exchange of business cards. Our hosts introduced themselves first and gave us time to understand who they were before we spoke.

The trade officers who looked after us were always referred to by name with the honorific "san" added, and since then I have followed the same courtesy in my own letters to Japanese contacts. Bringing enough business cards, receiving a card with care rather

than pushing it straight into your pocket, and not tipping are all simple things to get right. None of them will win you a contract. But getting them wrong can make you look careless, and in Japan carelessness is a serious concern.

In Indonesia, our partner always signs off emails with terima kasih, which means thank you in Bahasa Indonesia. Using those two words back costs nothing, and it is always noticed. Learning to say hello and thank you in the local language is one of the cheapest investments you will ever make in a market.

In China, I have learned to pay attention to who enters the room first, who sits where at the table and who is expected to speak. Seating at a business dinner is rarely random, and a toast is rarely just a toast. Seniority matters, and embarrassing someone in front of their colleagues, even without meaning to, can do damage that is very hard to repair.

Respect also shows up well away from the meeting room. If you are invited to a Hindu temple, a church or a mosque, or if the moment simply calls for it, going is a genuine sign of respect. Dress appropriately, follow the local customs, such as removing your shoes or covering your head where that is expected, and be present sincerely.

I learned how much that can mean during Covid, when the father of an Indian colleague passed away. I asked to go to his grave as a sign of respect.

The details differ from country to country. The principle does not. People notice when you have made an effort to understand them, and they notice even more when you have not.

Hospitality is not a waste of time

Many Western executives are uncomfortable with how much time hospitality takes in Asia. The dinner runs late. There is another lunch the next day. The hosts want to show you their city, their hospital and their favourite restaurant. Meanwhile, the visitor is quietly calculating how many meetings could have fitted into that time.

I understand the instinct. But I think it misreads what is happening.

In many Asian countries, people want to know who you are before they decide whether to work with you. Will you come back? Will you stand behind your product when something goes wrong? Will you treat their team, their patients and their reputation with care? Those questions are not answered in a slide deck. They are answered over time, and very often around a table.

When I was in Pune in June 2024 training new channel partners, the days were full of product sessions and practical questions. What stayed with me afterwards was the fantastic food and the close bond we built around it. That bond did more for the

partnership than any of the slides.

And when hospitality is offered to you, how you receive it matters. If you are in a hurry to leave, people notice. If you check your phone all through dinner, people notice. If you are genuinely interested in the people around you, they notice that too.

Respect starts before you land

Some time ago, I wrote a travel booklet for the young executives in our company. It covers practical things, such as respecting dining customs, not tipping in Japan, learning the local ride app before you land and learning to say hello and thank you in the local language.

But the most important line in that booklet is not practical at all:

"Always remember that you represent yourself, your company, your culture and your country, and treat everyone with respect, because a bad impression can last longer than your trip."

I still believe that is the best preparation for doing business anywhere in Asia.

Before you fly, read about the country, not just the market. Ask your local partner what you should know about the people you will meet. Find out whether a meeting is formal or informal, who will attend and how senior they are. Learn something about the food. Ask what is appropriate to wear. These are simple questions, and a good partner will be glad you asked them.

The deal starts earlier than you think

After more than 30 years, I am convinced that many MedTech companies lose business in Asia long before they lose it on price or evidence. They lose it at the dinner table, in a careless comment or in a moment of impatience that nobody mentions but everybody remembers.

The opposite is also true. Relationships open up when someone makes a small effort: a few words in the local language, a genuine interest in the food, a respectful greeting to the most senior person in the room, or simply coming back a second and a third time.

Your technology matters. Your clinical evidence matters. Your price matters. But in Asia, people first need to decide whether they want to do business with you.

And that decision often begins before the meeting does.

LET'S TALK

This wraps up my three articles on Asia. If you are trying to work out how to take your medical technology into Asian markets, I would be glad to talk it through. Write to me at **gary@synergenmedtech.com** and tell me about your commercialization or international business development challenges.

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