

East Meets West in Business Card Exchange

by Christine W. Zust, M.A.



Your business card is one of your most powerful marketing tools. Yet few professionals understand how the exchange of their card positions them in the minds of the receiver. One of the most useful tips I learned in my business career was mastering the art of business card exchange while participating in a trade mission to Japan. Let me share my experience with you and offer some suggestions for improving your positioning skills.

- **Don't tell; ask.** Many professionals offer their card by saying, "Here's my card." Never assume that the other person is interested in exchanging cards with you. Asking, "Would you like one of my business cards?" positions you as courteous and considerate. On the other hand, if you want the other person's card, it is more effective to ask, "May I have one of your cards," or say, "I would like one of your cards," rather than, "Do you have a card?"

- **Look and listen.** When you receive a person's business card, look at it. I know this sounds simple, but most professionals who are in "networking mode" rarely look at the card. They usually put it away quickly. Receive the card with both hands so you can singularly focus on the card. When you take the time to review and absorb the information on the card, you allow your brain to process and retain that information. It buys you a little extra time if you are trying to remember the person's name. It also gives you more to talk about as you converse.

- **Provide feedback.** When you review the business card, offer some feedback. Comment on the person's logo, business title, company location, or any other pertinent information. By doing this, you show the other person that you are genuinely interested. In Eastern culture, this is expected. It is not an option.

- **Ask for clarification.** If you are unsure of a name pronunciation, ask for help. If the person's full name is used, such as Randall or Catherine, ask if the person prefers the full name. I recently met a woman named Constance. Both her name tag and her business card indicated this, so I asked if she preferred Constance. She said, "Yes, thanks for asking." How do you think my action positioned me?

- **Don't leave home without them.** How often are you embarrassed because you either left your business cards back at the office, or you ran out of them? You run the risk of presenting yourself as unprofessional and unprepared. Always carry your business cards with you, even to social events and non-business functions, because you never know who you might meet. And be sure to carry more than 1 or 2 cards with you.

- **Do not write on cards.** Writing on another person's business card is considered disrespectful in Japan. Carry a few index cards or a small pocket-sized note pad with you to record important information. I recently ran into a high-ranking business executive who left her job about six months ago. The card she presented to me had a line drawn through her former office, fax and voicemail numbers; she left her home phone number intact. An inexpensively produced business card would position her more professionally.

Your business card may be the smallest marketing tool you have, and by applying these simple techniques, you will make it your most effective tool as well.

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