

# Mind the gaffe

As more associations look to justify the 'international' in their name, the opportunities for miscommunications and cultural howlers multiply by the day **James Lancaster** discovers....



As the world shifts on its axis, international associations – predominantly based in Europe and the US – are starting to explore new territories. Increasingly they are holding events in emerging economies, hoping to convert delegates into members. But industry leaders are warning that this rush for global reach, if handled badly, can do an association's reputation more harm than good. The world maybe getting smaller, but cultural morés are still entrenched. It pays to tread with care.

Isabel Amaral, president of the Portuguese Protocol Studies Association, is one of the world's leading authorities on cross-cultural communication and has taught at universities all over the world. For her, organising an event in unfamiliar environments is all about preparation. "The devil is always hiding in the detail," she says, "and suddenly your event is in the newspapers for all the wrong reasons."

Association executives and meeting planners should pay close attention to seemingly trivial aspects of social interaction, she says. A simple nod of the head, for example, could give the wrong impression.

"In some Asian countries nodding simply means 'I am listening'," says Amaral, "It does not mean 'I agree with you'. Similarly the okay sign is not okay in some cultures – it's offensive."

When in China facial expressions should be kept to a minimum to avoid any misunderstanding, and it is deemed uncouth to gesticulate when speaking, she warns. There are unwritten, but strictly observed, codes of practice when it comes to holding business meetings, too.

"The host always starts the conversation and others listen. No one interrupts. There is a moment of silence and reflection, then others answer. You must always allow for pauses."

Doing your homework before a business meeting is essential in certain countries. Some cultures, the Swiss and Germans for example, are low context cultures, where everything is explained. But others, the Arabs and Chinese, are high context cultures, where very little is explained.

It doesn't stop there. In some countries there is no concept of personal space, says Amaral. In Latin American or Arab countries people will be offended if you shy away from an embrace. Americans on the other hand have a strong sense of personal space. In some cultures looking someone in the eye says you are straightforward and honest, in others it is seen as rude and challenging. It's a minefield.

For Christoph Raudonat, director of the European Society of Association Executives, the key to successful growth is knowing why your organisation wants to grow in the first place, installing a plan to achieve that growth, and, crucially, managing expectations – first your own, then other people's.

"The more we engage with people overseas the more we have to deal with their enthusiasm," he warns. "You might find your

events over-run by Latin Americans because they want to take the event to their country. This is great, but you have to be careful that any social return on investment doesn't just explode. It could be very short-lived, unless you have a plan to manage it."

He argues against short-cuts. Trying to manage growth remotely is bound to fail.

"The better you network locally, the better your organisation will operate internationally. It pays to identify local partners. Before any meeting set the stage, keep it simple, avoid complexity and brush up on your language and facilitation skills before you go."

Frederic Van Houte, director general of the CIRFS, European Man-Made Fibres Association, highlights a paradox in the seemingly unstoppable march of globalisation.

"It's interesting to think that we are becoming more and more global but we are clearly not as global as we think," he reflects. "And it strikes me that globalisation is happening with a very Anglo-Saxon mind set. What I tend to do is read guide books, newspapers or anything to get information about the culture and religion but also the

food, religion, dress, language."

Despite all this diversity there is commonality and shared ground based on an understanding of Hinduism – not as a religion, but as a philosophy. Karma is a very popular concept. Indian society is also very hierarchical, based on seniority within the family. Lots of India's biggest companies are family-owned and have a rigid generational hierarchy. "So when you go to a meeting it's the oldest person you address first," advises Sarkar, "and never greet people by their first names."

Indians are very bad at saying no to people so ask very specific questions if you want a straight answer. Western meeting planners may find Indians' approach to business a little haphazard, but that's because Indians have a culture based on adaptation and innovation, she says, rather than planning. The ability to create something out of nothing, to make the best of a situation as it presents itself, is highly prized in India. Be patient too, she says, decision making can be slow.

When it comes to the nuts and bolts of planning a meeting, cultural differences can cause real complications in India,



history, which helps us understand why people behave in a certain way. And it is very useful to learn languages, too. To connect with your members in their own language will make a difference. To learn a language is to learn a culture."

In Asian cultures, he says, it is important to 'show respect and not to come across as arrogant'.

"Be prudent, pragmatic and tolerant. Especially in China it is important to stay calm. Don't get angry, that is seen as a weakness. People in China never want to lose face."

Monimita Sarkar, director of KW Conferences, India's first accredited PCO, says one of the fundamental aspects of doing business in that country was understanding its culture.

"It's a very hard country to characterise. Indians are not easy to understand, there's a vast difference between north and south,

Sarkar warns. For example, it simply isn't done to allow delegates to leave an event hungry. Everyone must be amply fed. The challenge here is what happens when the venue's minimum guarantee is bust. In most countries, this is fine. The delegate should have been quicker to the buffet. But in India this would amount to a serious loss of face for the host.

Sarkar, like Raudonat and Van Houte, urges associations to deal with a local intermediary – someone who knows the procedures and the protocol better than you – to ensure an event runs smoothly.

But there was consensus, too, that worrying overly about these things is counter-productive. Be polite, show respect and don't make hasty assumptions and you should, should, be okay.

*\*Notes taken from session at Association Congress 2013 in Estoril. ■*