What This Brit Has Learned From 10 Years of Doing Business in the States



Here’s what I’ve learned since my first foray across the pond.

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For ambitious Brits like me, America has always been a tempting-but-slightly-daunting market. When I founded my reputation-management consultancy two decades ago, I initially focused on growing the business in the U.K.

A decade ago, like countless others before me, I decided to make a big effort to break into the American market — you know, like The Beatles. I cleared my diary and booked a two-week trip to New York, deliberately resisting the urge to

arrange too many meetings because I wanted to soak up the atmosphere and make some new contacts.

By the end of my first week, I'd taken in the sights, eaten way too much food and really started to feel optimistic about what lay ahead. Thanks to some referrals, I returned to the U.K. with two clients to my name and was feeling excited about the potential to grow my U.S. business.

Fast forward to today, and a majority of my company's revenue comes from American clients; I'm in America for business every other week, and I'm actually writing this column from my New York office. When I look back at that first east-coast reconnaissance trip, I remember how it felt to first encounter America's pioneering, can-do spirit, and I realize how much I have learned since then.

It's taken a decade of ups and downs and a lot of hard work to get to this point. Here are the main lessons I've learned since then.

1. Americans are generally far more positive in business (and in life).

For example, think about how personal bankruptcy is viewed here. It happened to me in the U.K., where it still has a stigma. In America it can be seen as a positive thing – a sign that a person has tried and failed, but also, crucially, learned and bounced back. In Silicon Valley, you're not even considered a proper CEO until you've got a couple of bankruptcies under your belt. "Scars on your back," as they put it. Failure is a virtue if you learn from it.

2. U.S. business culture is

typically more formal.

One small example of this is the dress code. Suits, albeit not always with ties, are more common, although there are signs that this is changing, with investment bank Goldman Sachs recently relaxing the dress code for its employees. Communication in U.S. business is usually also more formal than in the U.K. The formality is also manifested in how (in my experience) it takes longer to win the trust of Americans in business relationships than it does in the UK.

3. Americans give far more direct feedback.

This is something I found hard to adjust to initially, but soon came to view as refreshing. In my experience of business in America, if a client is unhappy with your service, the client will soon tell you without pulling any punches. That's fine – you know exactly why the client is unhappy and can plan how to fix the problem before it snowballs into something really serious. In the U.K., communication is often more coded. It's not unusual to lose a client, and the first time you hear about their displeasure is when you get a polite, brief email giving notice that they're terminating your contract.

4. American culture is far more entrepreneurial than the U.K.

More people own shares and aspire to be entrepreneurs. Americans watching U.K. news bulletins may be surprised to see politicians talking about creating a more entrepreneurial, business-friendly culture, because in America that's a given. There were 739,000 new businesses in the US in 2018 – up from 560,000 in 2010.

5. Americans *love* Brits …

… even though you like to tease us about our class system and the state of our teeth. I never fail to be thankful that most Americans I do business with seem genuinely interested in and curious about British culture, and my general Britishness. One taxi driver, after learning I was British, asked if I knew heavyweight boxer Lennox Lewis. I explained that I didn't, because there are about 55 million people in Britain, but I loved his friendliness. (Incidentally, when I tweeted about this, Lennox Lewis replied back, suggesting that I should have pretended I did!)

I don't pretend to be anywhere near a U.S. insider or an expert on your business culture – humor can sometimes get lost in translation, for example – but I feel like I have learned a lot during a decade of doing business here.

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