

## Smart Guide for **Your first meeting with Japanese**

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## Preface

This guide aims to help you learn basic Japanese business etiquette and the way Japanese people run their meetings so that you will have a better idea on what to expect in your first meeting with your Japanese counterparts.

The way Japanese people do business is not something genetically coded. Japanese people also learn business etiquette when they start working after graduating from schools. Normally a company provides business etiquette training for a day (or two days) so that new hires can learn how to greet their customers, exchange business cards, select an appropriate seat, know when to (or not to) speak in the meeting etc. Learning business etiquette is not easy for Japanese either – new hires learn by making lots of mistakes on the job and getting coached by their managers.

When I learned basic business etiquette, my instructor said we learn business etiquette because it is a foundation for developing a trusted business relationship. The spirit of business etiquette is about doing things we like others to do for us, and showing respect and being caring and thoughtful for others.

Knowing business etiquette also helps you know how to play the “game” of a meeting. If you know the rules, you will know how to win the game and also when it is accepted to break a rule – without damaging the spirit of business etiquette.

NOTE: This guide was prepared with assumptions that:

1. The meeting is the first opportunity for you to meet face-to-face
2. You have made an appointment (this is not a visit without an appointment)
3. You are meeting rather typical Japanese company / people with limited international experience (and not someone like a young Japanese entrepreneur who grew up abroad)

## Meeting preparation

Recently I interviewed a number of Europeans who have worked with Japanese people. Many of them said knowing what to expect in a meeting is a key to establish favourable business relationship with Japanese. Compared to European and other Western countries, Japanese run meetings in a very different way. One of my interviewees said: **a meeting is a ceremony** for Japanese people.

What does “a meeting is a ceremony” mean? It means it is less likely that you will be surprised with the outcome of the meeting. In other words, you should know what will happen in the meeting before you go to the meeting. There should be no surprise for both parties – no matter if it is positive or negative news.

This approach to a meeting could actually benefit you because you are in a position to somewhat control the meeting outcome in a preparation phase. It may require you to spend much more time and energy to prepare, but if you know what will happen in the meeting, you would not feel you wasted your time after the meeting. So, let’s thoroughly prepare for your first meeting with Japanese. You will see the benefits.

## What to know before a meeting

- **Objective(s) / Expectation(s) / Agenda of the meeting**

Make sure you align on the objective(s) of the meeting with your point of contact to understand what is expected from their side and also to get them ready to hear your story. Normally for the first meeting, the main topic will be introducing each company, team and products to the other. It is less likely that any decision will be made in the first meeting – however, if you want them to take a certain action by the end of the meeting, you have to let them know in advance so that they can prepare for it. Your point of contact will tell you if it is feasible expectation or not.

- **Who attends from their side**

Obtain a list of attendees with their title and job responsibility so that you know who will be the key members for a project you are going to engage in. Don’t be surprised if you receive a long list of attendees because it is very common to have many attendees who only observe a meeting.

- **Meeting language / availability of an interpreter**

This is very important to check with your counterpart beforehand – because many Japanese people are not fluent in English. Please do not overestimate that many Japanese people will speak English – even if they say they can. Do not assume their English speaking proficiency is similar to their writing. Normally Japanese people write English much better than speak.

Once the meeting language is chosen and if they say that they will prepare an interpreter from their office or from their agent, make sure you speak to the interpreter on the phone to test whether you can understand their English fully. It is better to share your presentation and company information with the interpreter well in advance so that they can ask you questions if anything is not clear to them.

Check with the interpreter whether the interpretation will be done simultaneously or consecutively – and plan your meeting agenda accordingly. Be aware your presentation(s) have to be half the time in case of consecutive interpretation.

- **Lunch / Dinner?**

If you want to invite them for lunch or dinner, it has to be arranged in advance as well. You don't have to invite everyone (e.g. you can invite only your point of contact to receive more casual feedback or just have chat, if you wish).

Normally, Japanese business people will not consume alcohol during lunch (because they have to go back to the office sober). Many companies also have rather strictly scheduled “lunch time” between 11:45 and 13:00 for 1 hour sharp. If you are inviting them for lunch, don't be surprised if they have to rush to go back to their office. Again, you can check how long they can spend at lunch with your point of contact.

Dinner is very different from lunch. Japanese people often start their business dinner between 6pm and 7pm (Note that business dinner normally starts much earlier than European dinner time). Here Japanese will consume alcohol and you might see some of them get drunk easily (because about half of Japanese population lack enzyme to digest alcohol quickly). Especially, the older generations see drinking over dinner is an important opportunity to get to know each other more personally, so you can leverage the opportunity to create a strong bond with your Japanese counterpart.

- **Direction to the meeting venue**

Make sure you check your schedule and plan the meeting so that you can arrive at the venue by at least 5 minutes before your appointment. Being on time is one of the most important things when meeting Japanese. Showing up late must be avoided, but also showing up too early is not recommended. For a very important meeting, Japanese business people often arrive around the meeting venue at least 30 minutes before the meeting and wait at a near-by café, a hotel lobby, a convenience store or simply outside of the office building.

If your meeting venue is in a major city, using public transportation is highly recommended. Check both Google Maps and Jorudan (<http://www.jorudan.co.jp/english/>) to find the best train / metro route. If you are not sure, ask your point of contact or hotel's concierge to give you a direction.

Being on time also applies if you are invited to a Japanese person's house / apartment for lunch / dinner. Unlike Europe, everything is ready to be served when you arrive there on time. Never arrive late for any occasion. If you will be late more than 5 – 10 min, make sure you give them a call to inform them you are on your way.

## What to bring to a meeting

Make sure you bring enough business cards, brochures and copies of your presentation(s) to distribute to every person attending the meeting. Asking them to share documents is not well regarded. Bringing a few extra is recommended.

- **Business cards in Japanese**

Never forget to bring your business cards in a business card holder. It is highly recommended to print your name in Japanese on the other side of your business cards. Unless you have a very common name, such as Mike, Tom, Maria, Anne, it is very difficult for Japanese people to remember how to pronounce your name by just hearing it. Japanese printing (*katakana*) will help them know how to say your name – and they will appreciate your extra thought to put your name in Japanese.

- **Company & product brochures**

Bring brochures of your company (and products / services) if available. Japanese version will be highly appreciated, but if you don't have one, English version is acceptable.

- **Hard copies of your presentation(s)**

In a formal meeting, you should bring hard copies of your presentation(s). Don't ask your counterpart to print the documents for you unless they offer you to do so. If you don't want to travel with all the papers, you could prepare USB sticks with all the materials for everyone, or you can print all the documents at your hotel's business centre or a near-by convenience store open 24/7. Note the standard paper size in Japan is A4.

- **Product samples**

If relevant, bring product samples. Depending on the product, it does not have to be distributed to everyone. If your products are not too expensive consumer goods, like a body lotion or candies, bring your company products to everyone. You don't have to give them your company products if they are expensive (e.g. luxury handmade bags), bulky (e.g. furniture), not everyone to try (e.g. medicines, engine parts), etc.

- **Company premium goods**

If you have company pens, note pads, key chains etc., it is nice gesture to bring them for all the attendees. No need to create a new company item just for a meeting unless you really want to.

- **A wrapped gift**

A small wrapped gift is always appreciated especially for the first meeting and if you are travelling from abroad. A gift should be handed to either most senior person attending the meeting or your point of contact. A box of sweets (chocolates, cookies, etc.) from your country's top brand will be appreciated. When bringing a box of sweets, it is better to bring something easier to share because they can place your box in a common area so that everyone in a department / company can try your gift.

## What to wear for a meeting

- **Men**

For your first meeting, dress conservatively with a dark suit (or a simple jacket and trousers) and a plain or simple shirt and a tie. For second meeting onwards, you can adjust what you wear based on what your counterparts wear.

In summer, many Japanese companies adopt “cool biz” dress code to save energy (wear something light to keep an air conditioning temperature at 26 – 28 degrees). Normally they will not wear a jacket, and a shirt can be half-sleeve. However, if your first meeting is held in the summer, I would still recommend you to wear a jacket. When your Japanese counterpart tells you that you can take off your jacket, it is OK to take it off.

If using cologne / perfume, be modest about the amount you wear. Know that most of Japanese men (especially old generations) don’t use any and Europeans are stereotyped as being “smelly” for using too much cologne / perfume.

- **Women**

For your first meeting, dress conservatively with a dark suit, or a simple jacket with a skirt or a pair of trousers. Depending on your industry, it may be acceptable to wear a simple dress without a jacket. If wearing a skirt, it should not be too short (avoid a length shorter than 10 cm above your knees) and you must wear natural-coloured stockings (even in the summer). Boots are not considered appropriate for business. Wear pumps (if you are tall, avoid wearing too high heels because you will end up looking down many Japanese men you will meet).

For second meeting onwards, you can adjust what you wear based on what your counterparts wear. If wearing any accessories, choose simple, smaller accessories. Be modest about the amount of perfume you put on.

- **If going to a restaurant**

If you know you are going to a traditional sushi restaurant, do NOT wear any cologne / perfume because it will destroy your (and those around you) sense of taste and be considered as barbarian behaviour by the locals.

Sometimes you have to remove your shoes at the restaurant to be seated. Make sure your socks are also “presentable.” I have seen many foreign businessmen super embarrassed because of holes on their socks

Now you are ready to go to a meeting. Make sure you arrive there at least 5 min in advance!

## Introduction

You arrived at the office on time and now are in a meeting room waiting for your counterparts to enter the room. I was taught NEVER to sit down to wait for the others because it may be seen that I am too relaxed and not humble enough. Then what do you do until they come?

If you are waiting for your counterparts to arrive at the meeting room, you can use the time to:

- Set up your laptop and test it with the projector
- Distribute handout materials for each seat
- Enjoy the view from the window or the art object placed in the meeting room (if there is a window or an object)

When you are visiting a Japanese company, you are the visitor, which means you are their guest and should be seated at the best seat. If people from a Japanese company are visiting your office, they are the guest and should be given the best seats. Check Seating Protocol section for more details.

## Introducing yourself

As soon as people from the Japanese company arrives in the meeting room, you should have your business cards ready to greet them one by one by exchanging the business cards. No matter who has been your point of contact or most helpful, you start greeting with the most senior person from their side. In Japan it is a safe to assume the oldest person is the most senior person. Your point of contact may facilitate the introduction, but if not, you can introduce yourself like:

You / They: Hello

You: My name is \_\_\_\_\_ (presenting your business card)

They: My name is \_\_\_\_\_ (presenting their business card – then you exchange them)

You / They: Nice to meet you (bow a little)

You can shake hands with them, but shaking hands is not a part of Japanese business etiquette, so be aware you may receive very soft handshakes from Japanese people. Greeting with hugs or kisses are not practiced at all and you will totally shock them if you do so – unless they worked or studied overseas.

## Big group introduction

What would you do if both sides bring 5 people each? In a formal setting, everyone still has to start greeting the most senior person at the other side. Normally Japanese people will form a line so that you just need to move to one direction (say, left to right person). This means by the time the most senior person from your company is finishing greeting the most junior person from the Japanese side, the most junior person from your company is just starting greeting the most senior person from their side. In this case, everyone has to wait until the most junior people from the both side greet to each other. It is OK to go back to in front of the most senior person and have a casual chat.

5 is a manageable number, but what if you have 10 or 20 people from both sides? It will take forever to greet each other. In such case, I have heard one of the senior people from the hosting company suggest randomly exchanging business cards to save time. If this instruction is given, you normally start greeting with some one at your level. If you are the most senior person from your company, you start with the most senior person from their company and move down to less senior people. If you are the most junior person, you normally start with the most junior person from their company and move up to more senior people. If you are in the middle, start with the middle person from their side and greet with whomever closest to you becomes available.

## Exchanging business cards

If you don't have one, please buy a business card holder and keep your business cards there. Japanese people are taught to treat their own business cards like their other self. That's why business cards should never be placed in a wallet or pocket of your clothes (especially back pocket of your trousers) and you should never scribble on the business cards in front of the people who gave you these cards. It is OK to write on business cards after you leave the meeting to keep memo about the people.



When presenting your business card, use both hands and hold the corners of the cards (right picture). You should present the card so that the other person can read your business card. When exchanging business cards, you take one hand from your card to receive the other person's business card like shown in the photo. You should position your business card as low as the other person – this is also considered to show your humbleness. If you are a (future) supplier, it is better if your card is presented slightly lower than the other person's.



## How to address people

In an official business environment, Japanese people normally call others by their family name.

| Addressing             | How to address them         | Example         |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| Your company's person  | Family name (or first name) | Smith (or Mike) |
| Their company's person | Family name + "san"         | Watanabe-san    |

Therefore, you can call your Japanese counterparts with their family name and adding "san" at the end unless otherwise asked or instructed (some people may have English name). It is better to call a person from your team by their family name only, but it is also acceptable to call them by their first name only (without adding "san"). Using family name makes it sound more formal.

Japanese people will address you by your family name and “san” or your first name and “san” – depending on how you introduce your team. They will address their own people by their family name (unless they have two or more people with the same family name and have to distinguish them by using their first name – e.g. if there are two Watanabe, then one is called Watanabe and the second person is called either only by their first name like Ken or by combining their family name and first name like Watanabe-Ken).

## Seating protocol

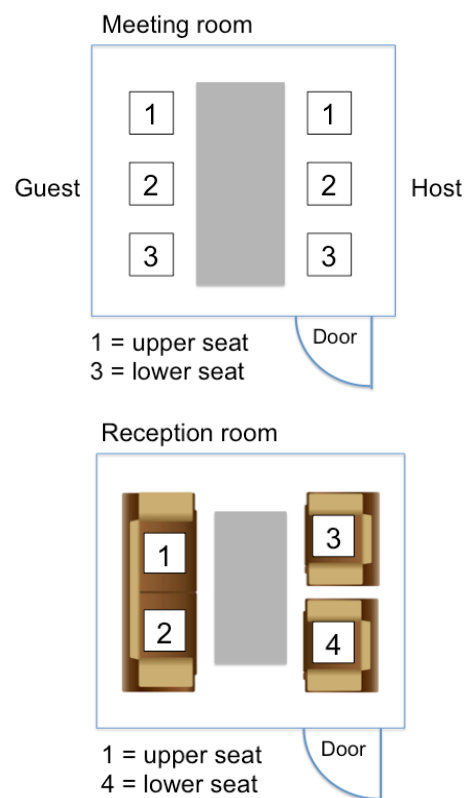
In Japan there is a concept of “upper” and “lower” seats. Guests must be seated at the upper (= best) seats. If you are visiting a Japanese company, regardless of you being their (future) supplier or client, you will be treated as a guest and will be seated at the upper seat. What you need to remember is: the seat closest to the door is the lowest seat. I was taught this is very practical because if more tea is wanted or some documents need to be photocopied, the most junior person can go out from a meeting room without disturbing anyone else if s/he is seated next to the door. The most senior people can enjoy comfortable seats without being disturbed.

In a typical meeting room set-up (see the top right picture), each party will be seated at each side of the table. The hosting company will sit at the side closer to the door. If, for example, you are the only one from your company, while the Japanese side has 4 attendees, it is best to ask them where you should sit. They may think it is better you sit in the middle and adjust their seating accordingly so that the more senior people will sit in front of you.

If you are meeting in a reception room (which has a lower table with a sofa and armchairs – see the bottom right picture), a sofa seat is considered upper than an armchair seat (because a sofa is regarded as more comfortable than an armchair seat). In a Japanese reception room, a sofa is normally placed further away from the door and armchair(s) close to the door.

Of course, there are always exceptions. If a meeting room has a big window with a spectacular view (of Mt. Fuji, for example), your host may suggest you take a seat closer to the door so that you can enjoy the view. In a restaurant, they may ask you to take a centre seat so that everyone can mingle with you. Always follow what the host suggests you.

When you finally take a seat, you can place the business cards you received in front of you so that these cards remind you of their names. If you received many business cards, you can keep all of them in your business card holder or place key people’s cards in front of you. Never play with their business cards.



## What to expect in a meeting

If you planned well with your point of contact, you should know what is going to happen from now until the end of the meeting. That said, here are some key points to facilitate your meeting so that you can get the best out of it.

### Importance of casual chat

Once you are seated, your host will probably start a casual chat with you. They might ask you about your trip to Japan, any plan for sightseeing, or your favourite sports. They might talk about their experience of visiting your country, the food they tried, or their favourite artist. Never try ending a casual chat quickly to move onto the agenda (make sure you allocate some time for an icebreaking chat).

Starting with a casual chat is actually beneficial for you to test their English level and adjust your speaking speed and words you use. You can also get used to speaking to them via an interpreter, in case of using one. Because this is your first meeting with them, the Japanese side believes such chat is very important to get to know you before speaking business. Leverage this opportunity to create a positive impression with them and learn about them.

### Asking questions

Depending on their corporate culture, Japanese people may not interrupt your presentation even if they have a question. They keep all the questions until you finish your presentation and then ask questions. This is because many Japanese think you may have answers to their questions later in the presentation, so they patiently listen to your presentation until the end.

If you are a type of person who likes to ask questions as they come up, I recommend you to ask in advance if the Japanese side is OK with you asking questions. In this case, ask only burning questions to minimise interrupting their presentation.

### Nodding and “Yes” does not mean “I agree”

While you are presenting and having discussion with your Japanese counterparts, you may notice that they nod frequently and say “yes” to your words. This does not mean they agree with what you are saying, but they are acknowledging that they are listening to and understand your point of view (although they may have different view). Japanese people are at a meeting to understand everything you know, so be prepared to receive lots of detailed questions. They ask these questions not to point out flaws in your presentation, but really understand your presentation fully.

## Saying “No”

You may have heard or read that Japanese people avoid saying “No” directly – and this is true in many occasions. You will have to read between the lines and catch some signals they send to indicate they are not happy or in line with the course of discussion.

When Japanese people want to mean “No,” they often indicate something might be difficult. If you hear “difficult,” expect what you are discussing is probably not very feasible in their opinion. You can ask them questions to understand the cause for the difficulties.

They may also stay silent so you do not hear any opinion from their side on the topic. You can gently (never too assertively) ask them for an opinion again to check if they did not catch your question or they are staying silent for a good reason.

They may suddenly change the subject of the conversation when they mean “No.” If this happens, you could gently (again, never too assertively) remind them the subject has shifted and get back to the subject. If they move to another subject again, they may be really saying “No” to what you are discussing.

## Not everyone will speak

Especially when the Japan side brings a lot of attendees, do not expect everyone to have something to say. Similarly, in a company with strong hierarchical culture, it will be very rare to have anyone junior to say something.

For many Japanese people, it is also very difficult to speak up and share their opinions freely without having consent from their manager in advance. Therefore, a brainstorming session will less likely to work with Japanese people – especially in your first meeting with them.

## Tips for a successful meeting

Now you know what happens in a meeting with Japanese, here are a few tips to help you make your meeting fruitful.

### Avoid misunderstanding

You are having a meeting with people whose language and culture are different from yours. Once your meeting is scheduled, it is worthwhile to practice speaking with minimum, simple English and speaking slowly. For your interpreter, it is easier if you keep each sentence short.

For an important point, make sure you go over the same point a few times so that you can confirm their point by asking questions from different angles.

During the preparation phase or before starting a meeting, don't forget to agree who will summarise meeting outcomes and next steps. Normally, a supplier-side will draft and a client-side will review. Make sure you have a meeting minute shared by both parties with agreed action steps, which you can use to follow up with them.

## **Be very patient**

I would like to remind you that you will most likely to walk out of the meeting room without any firm decision or agreement. Please don't be discouraged by this. If you think you could make a good connection with the Japan side, you have done super well at your first meeting.

In fact, many European people I have interviewed raised this point saying that they had to be very patient before they actually started working with Japanese. It may take several meetings before reaching to any agreement. What Japanese people are doing is to understand every detail and make sure they are very comfortable with the decision they will make. That's why they will ask you a lot of questions and probably additional information.

My European interviewees mentioned that once they started working with Japanese, things are implemented thoroughly and perfectly (because Japanese evaluated all the aspects) and their relationships tend to be very long-term. As a proverb goes: all the good things come to those who wait.

## **Learn a few Japanese phrases and use them**

When I was working in Japan, my manager from Argentina was someone well received by many Japanese companies we worked with. I was observing how he greeted with Japanese people and how he participated in a meeting.

He told me trying to master how to bow was actually very difficult. How deep or shallow you bow depends on a situation and it is too difficult to judge the right degrees for any foreigner new to Japan. Japanese people can immediately point out if you bowed correctly or not. So, he stopped bowing because how hard he tried he felt he was not bowing correctly. Instead, he shook hands with everyone with a big, friendly smile. Japanese people know handshake is common in the Western world, so they reacted very positively to his confident handshakes.

Although he gave up learning a subtle gesture, he complemented it with a strong handshake, friendly smile and a few, very useful Japanese phrases. He would greet Japanese people and introduce himself in Japanese. The beauty of this is that the phrases he learned (such as Hello, Thank you) are easy to learn and could be used again and again in every meeting regardless of whether it is the first meeting or second onwards.

I suggest you to also learn these key phrases to leave a favourable impression with Japanese like my ex-manager did. It will not take much effort, but will benefit you a lot. Besides the basics, here is a very useful Japanese phrase for you: Yoroshiku onegai shimasu

**When to use and its meaning**

*Exchanging business cards*

- Nice to meet you

*Opening a meeting*

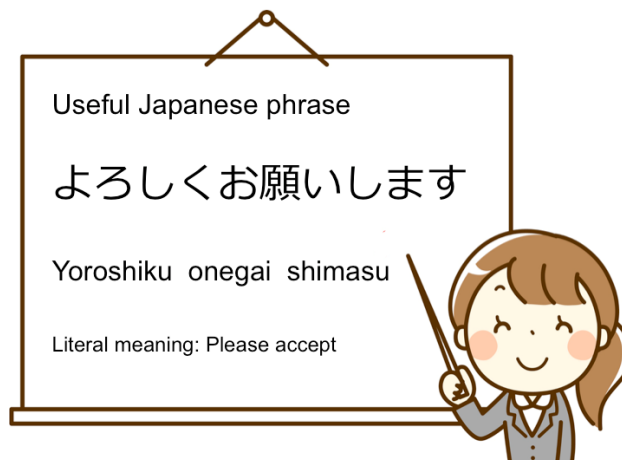
- Thank you for taking the time to meet
- Thank you for having me / us

*Closing the meeting*

- I / We look forward to working / doing business with you

*As a closure of an email*

- I am / We are counting on you
- Thank you for / We appreciate your attention to this matter



Wishing you all the best!

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