

GET PERSONAL

Formal relationships between companies or institutions mean very little; actual relationships between individuals mean a great deal. Take the time to get to know your counterparts, and be prepared to invest substantial time outside the office to establish sufficient rapport to do business. This may include long evening meals with seemingly endless toasts, or it may involve a visit to the banya, the Russian sauna. Getting to know government decision-makers is also important for doing business in Russia, because the amount of bureaucratic hassle can vary widely depending on whom you know.

MIND THE CALENDAR

Russian businesspeople will be at their dachas (country houses) in August. Because of holidays, next to nothing can be accomplished between Western Christmas and mid-January. The Orthodox Church still runs on the old calendar, which means that its Christmas and New Year's celebrations are two weeks later than its western counterparts. From May Day to Victory Day (May 9) is another holiday period when offices will be nearly vacant. March 8—International Women's Day—remains important, and forgetting to give all female staff flowers would be a faux pas. Holidays in general are in flux, as the country decides how much of the Soviet legacy to retain, how many of Yeltsin's innovations to keep and how many pre-Soviet traditions to restore.

DON'T MIND THE CLOCK

Punctuality is not a hallmark of Russia. Meetings may be scheduled for a particular time, but many things can happen in the meantime to change the schedule. Be prepared to roll with the punches. This lack of structure also means that opportunities can arise suddenly when all approaches had seemed blocked. Improvisation is a key skill for coping with Russia. Because the informal aspects of business are the most important, it is not unusual to receive work-related calls late in the evening. In contrast, reaching someone promptly at 9 a.m. may prove impossible.

HOW DO YOU DO

"Comrade" is long gone as a form of address, and nothing has taken its place. Russians will address each other by first name and patronymic, e.g., Boris Nikolayevich or Alexandra Ivanovna. Do not mistake this for familiarity, however, as they will retain formal terms of address when using the names. And when men and women are introduced, chances are good that they will not shake hands, but will acknowledge each other by making eye contact, and perhaps giving a small nod.

THE LITTLE THINGS

What look like superstitions to outsiders are largely unquestioned codes of conduct in Russian culture. Never give anyone an even number of flowers; save that for a funeral. Do not whistle in somebody's home. Do not shake hands across a threshold. Do not clean the house on the day somebody departs; it is a sign that you do not want that person to return. Forgetting something on a visit, by contrast, is good; it means you will go back.