

Business etiquette, language & culture

Spanish Society & Culture

Language

The Spanish language is Castilian and comes from the region of Castille. It is the official language of the entire country. However, there are several languages spoken in Spain in addition to Spanish, each with their own pronunciations and spellings, including Catalan (spoken in Catalonia, the Balearic Islands, and Valencia); Valencian (in Valencia); Galician or Gallego (in northwest Spain); and Euskera (in the Basque area).

Knowledge of English is reasonably extensive in Spanish business, particularly amongst executives and the younger generation, but do not rely on being able to communicate in English – check ahead to see if an interpreter is needed. The DIT (formerly UKTI) teams in Spain can assist with finding an interpreter if required (see contact details in this guide).

As a common courtesy, as a UK business wishing to succeed in Spain you will find that understanding and speaking a little Spanish – although possibly not essential – does indicate that you are serious about doing business there, and shows that you are keen to understand and appreciate their local culture. If your plan is to sell to the Spanish, try to speak Spanish.

The people

The majority of Spaniards are Roman Catholic, although different religious beliefs are accepted, and the family is considered the most important thing to the Spanish. They are cheerful and outgoing, and use expansive body language to express this. Personal pride and individualism are highly valued, as are character and rank and status, with conservatism and modesty being valued over assertiveness. People strive to project affluence and social position as appearance is considered extremely important, dressing elegantly and avoiding bright or flashy colours. Human relationships are also considered very important, particularly in the business world.

Meeting and greeting

While many Spaniards of the opposite sex greet each other with a kiss on both cheeks, this is not common in business relationships unless the parties know each other well. It is best to shake hands with everyone present – men, women and children – at a business or social meeting. If a kiss is appropriate, the Spanish will initiate it.

The Spanish have two first names and two surnames, composed of their father's first surname and their mother's first surname. Use Señor (Sr.) or Señora (Sra.) as you would Mr. or Mrs., and 'Señorita' for an unmarried woman.

Dining

Business can be conducted over meals, but be aware that the Spanish regard eating mainly as a sociable activity. Spaniards rarely invite business contacts to their home; instead they prefer to meet in a restaurant or café. Lunches/dinners are a vital part of establishing a relationship to see if the chemistry is correct and to develop trust. Generally very little business tends to be carried out at mealtimes.

It is acceptable and not uncommon to be late by 30 minutes in southern Spain and 15 minutes in northern Spain for social meetings. Restaurants tend to stay open late at night, and dinner usually commences around 9.00 or 10.00pm.

Corporate culture

Overview

Dress code is hugely important in Spain. How you dress will be perceived as a reflection of your social standing and success in business. A belief in status permeates all aspects of Spanish society – ideally you should try to find a well-connected person to establish good introductions for you.

Trust and personal relationships are the keys to the success of doing business in Spain. Spaniards will want to spend time getting to know you and establishing a relationship before doing business. Personal qualities are valued over technical ability, professionalism or competence.

Spaniards do not take punctuality for business meetings seriously, but expect that you will be on time. However, be prepared to possibly wait a while for your Spanish counterparts to arrive.

Do not be surprised if during business meetings your Spanish colleagues speak at the same time or interrupt one another – this is not unusual and it is common to express open disagreement and constructive conflict. Do not move away or keep your distance as this may be interpreted as unfriendly. The Spanish prefer less personal space than is the norm in the UK.

Emails

Be careful with emails. Write in Spanish whenever possible using good, simple, concise and direct language. Never rely on internet translation sites as they are often

inaccurate – always use a Spanish person or official translator.
See: www.astlanguage.com

Business cards

These should be printed in English on one side and in Spanish overleaf. You should hand your card with the Spanish side facing the recipient.

Meetings

To arrange a meeting write first (in Spanish), and follow-up with a phone call or e-mail. Large businesses usually work from 9.00 am until about 1.30 or 2.00 pm, then from 4.30 or 5.00 pm until about 8.00 pm, with a long lunch break of about two hours starting around 1.30pm. The best time for meetings is between 10.00 and 11.00 am or after 5.00 pm. Avoid Friday afternoons, August, Catholic festivals and national holidays as many businesses will be closed (see the table of holidays).

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Spanish public holidays

2016

Date

Day

Holiday

Region

25 Oct

Tue

Basque Country Regional Holiday

Basque Country

1 Nov

Tue

All Saints' Day

National

3 Dec

Sat

San Francisco Javier

Navarre

6 Dec

Tue

Constitution Day

National

8 Dec

Thu

Immaculate Conception

National

25 Dec

Sun

Christmas Day

National

26 Dec

Mon

Regional Holiday

Extremadura

26 Dec

Mon

St. Stephen's Day

Catalonia

2017

Date

Day

Holiday

Region

1 Jan

Sun

New Year's Day

National

6 Jan

Fri

Epiphany

National

28 Feb

Tue

Andalusia Regional Holiday

Andalusia

1 Mar

Wed

Balearic Islands Regional Holiday

Balearic Islands

19 Mar

Sun

St. Joseph's Day

Melilla, Castilla-La Mancha, Galicia, Balearic Islands, Madrid, Murcia, Navarre, Asturias, Valencia

13 Apr

Thu

Maundy Thursday

National (Except Catalonia and Valencia)

14 Apr

Fri

Good Friday

National

17 Apr

Mon

Easter Monday

Catalonia, Balearic Islands, Navarre, Basque Country, Valencia

24 Apr

Mon

Aragon Regional Holiday

Aragon

24 Apr

Mon

Castile and León Regional Holiday

Castile and León

1 May

Mon

Labour Day

National

2 May

Tue

Madrid Regional Holiday

Madrid

15 May

Mon

San Isidro

Madrid

17 May

Wed

Galician Literature Day

Galicia

30 May

Tue

Canary Islands Regional Holiday

Canary Islands

31 May

Wed

Castile-La Mancha Regional Holiday

Castilla-La Mancha

9 Jun

Fri

Murcia Regional Holiday

Murcia

9 Jun

Fri

La Rioja Regional Holiday

La Rioja

15 Jun

Thu

Corpus Christi

Castilla-La Mancha

24 Jun

Sat

St. John's Day

Catalonia

25 Jul

Tue

St. James Day

Galicia

15 Aug

Tue

Assumption of Mary

National

2 Sep

Sat

Ceuta Municipal Holiday

Ceuta

1 Sep

Fri

Feast of the Sacrifice / Eid al-Adha

Ceuta & Melilla

8 Sep

Fri

Asturias Regional Holiday

Asturias

8 Sep

Fri

Extremadura Regional Holiday

Extremadura

11 Sep

Mon

National Day of Catalonia

Catalonia

15 Sep

Fri

Cantabria Regional Holiday

Cantabria

9 Oct

Mon

Valencian Regional Holiday

Valencia

12 Oct

Thu

Fiesta Nacional de España

National

25 Oct

Wed

Basque Country Regional Holiday

Basque Country

1 Nov

Wed

All Saints' Day

National

6 Dec

Wed

Constitution Day

National

8 Dec

Fri

Immaculate Conception

National

25 Dec

Mon

Christmas Day

National

26 Dec

Tue

St. Stephen's Day

Catalonia

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