



# People Skills

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## Tips for welcoming international guests to your hotel

Another great article from *The Rooms Chronicle*®, the #1 journal for hotel rooms management! \*\*\*Important notice: This article may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher or the author.\*\*\* College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com

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In the hotel business, we welcome guests; it's a given. But, are you prepared to welcome international visitors? Generally, when Americans travel abroad they are accustomed to speaking English and expecting others to understand them, being able to easily exchange currency, obtain travel directions and most of the other basics involved with travel.

As international travel has become more available and less expensive, particularly during the last two decades, the ability to travel unhindered from country to country has almost evolved as an inherent right of business and leisure travelers. Furthermore, the weak exchange rate that the American dollar recently holds in relation to the currency of many developed nations has prompted a large influx of international travelers to the United States for general tourism.

The Travel Industry Association forecasts that the number of international travelers visiting the United States will grow by more than 3% annually in 2008, 2009 and 2010 with spending for these respective years projected to be \$98.6billion, \$105.7billion, and \$112.9billion. International visitors are an important tourism market segment and represent a tremendous economic benefit to our communities, often spending double what the domestic visitor spends and staying longer.

So now do a quick assessment, could you be more prepared to receive international visitors? Here are some tips to help make your international guests feel more welcome.

**Reservations:** Listen carefully and speak slowly. Along with the correct spelling of the guest's name write the phonetic pronunciation. Everyone loves the sound of their name, *when it is pronounced correctly!*

**Front Desk:** Welcome letters in other languages are a great way to make guests feel welcome. They also provide a practical way to anticipate problems. For example, in some Asian countries, shower curtains are not used – the water simply travels through a drain in the middle of the floor. Advising international guests of this in a welcome letter could be a way to solve those recurring leaks your hotel has been experiencing! Also, either provide currency exchange at the front desk or have written directions to the nearest currency exchange center or bank.

**Restaurant/Room Service:** Understand dietary habits and offer specials that appeal to their needs or desires. For example – no pork for Orthodox Jews or Muslims, no beef for Hindus.

Remember that tipping is not a universal practice. Make your staff aware why tipping may not be practiced by our international guests. Also, provide tasteful guidelines about tipping which may help the guests better handle and understand the American tipping custom. Allow international guests to enjoy a relaxed meal by not picking up the plates too quickly and not bringing the check before they ask for it. Remember that ice is not always preferred in drinks, so ask before adding ice. Ask international guests if mineral water is preferred to tap water. Be aware that coffee is usually drunk stronger than we drink it. Espresso is often requested and “decaf” is rarely drunk by international guests.

**Concierge or Bell Staff:** Be prepared with good quality maps that depict areas of interest. Keep an updated record of employees who speak international languages and use those valuable resources to help guests. Provide bilingual dictionaries of major languages to aid in communication. Use international signage whenever possible such as for restrooms, telephones, smoking, etc.



International Traveler Forecast to the United States

	2008	2009	2010
International Visitors Travel Expenditures in U.S. (\$ Billions)	98.6	105.7	112.9
Total International Visitors to the U.S. (Millions)	55.6	57.6	59.5

Source: Travel Industry Association

**All:** A listing of all employees and the languages they speak will be very helpful. Use appropriate English, not slang; it's difficult enough trying to communicate in another language. If speaking to a guest with limited English ability, use active listening. Simply repeat back what you understood them to say and invite them to repeat back what you have said. That is the best way to know if you have understood one another.

Many cultures display more formality than ours, especially in the use of names. Avoid calling these guests by their first names unless invited to do so and use titles (Mr./Mrs., Doctor, Professor, etc.) with their surnames. When unsure which name is their surname, simply ask.

Body language can be a useful tool in communicating, but can also be misinterpreted among cultures. Some important considerations are:

- People of other cultures may have a different “comfort zone” than we do. Try to adjust to the distance they are comfortable with when conversing.
- Hand gestures have different meanings in different cultures. Our “ok” sign is seen as offensive by some! Rather than pointing with a finger, an outstretched open palm is more appropriate when giving directions.
- In general, it is best to avoid physically touching international guests as it may be forbidden or perceived as too aggressive in some cultures.
- Keep in mind that not all cultures use direct eye contact as it may be considered intrusive and disrespectful to them. Try to mirror the degree of eye contact they give you in order to keep them comfortable.
- The handshake has many variations among cultures. Wait to see if the international visitor extends his/her hand, and if so, try to match the pressure and length of the handshake given to you.

A good resource for more detailed information on specific countries/customs is: [executiveplanet.com](http://executiveplanet.com). With a little preplanning you'll soon be making all your guests, including your international guests, feel more welcome! ✧

*(Dr. Deborah T. Curtis is a veteran hotel manager and the director of the Hospitality Training & Research Center at Niagara University. The Center conducts feasibility studies, industry diagnosis, professional development, and customized training for arts and cultural organizations, hotels, casinos, restaurants and attractions. E-mail: [dcurtis@niagara.edu](mailto:dcurtis@niagara.edu))*

## Hot tip

If you need a translator immediately, the AT&T Language Line provides translation services and interpreters for over 170 languages, 24 hours a day. The translation service may be paid for through a credit card or by establishing an account with Language Line.

The number is 1-800-528-5888.  
Website: [www.languageline.com/webpi](http://www.languageline.com/webpi)