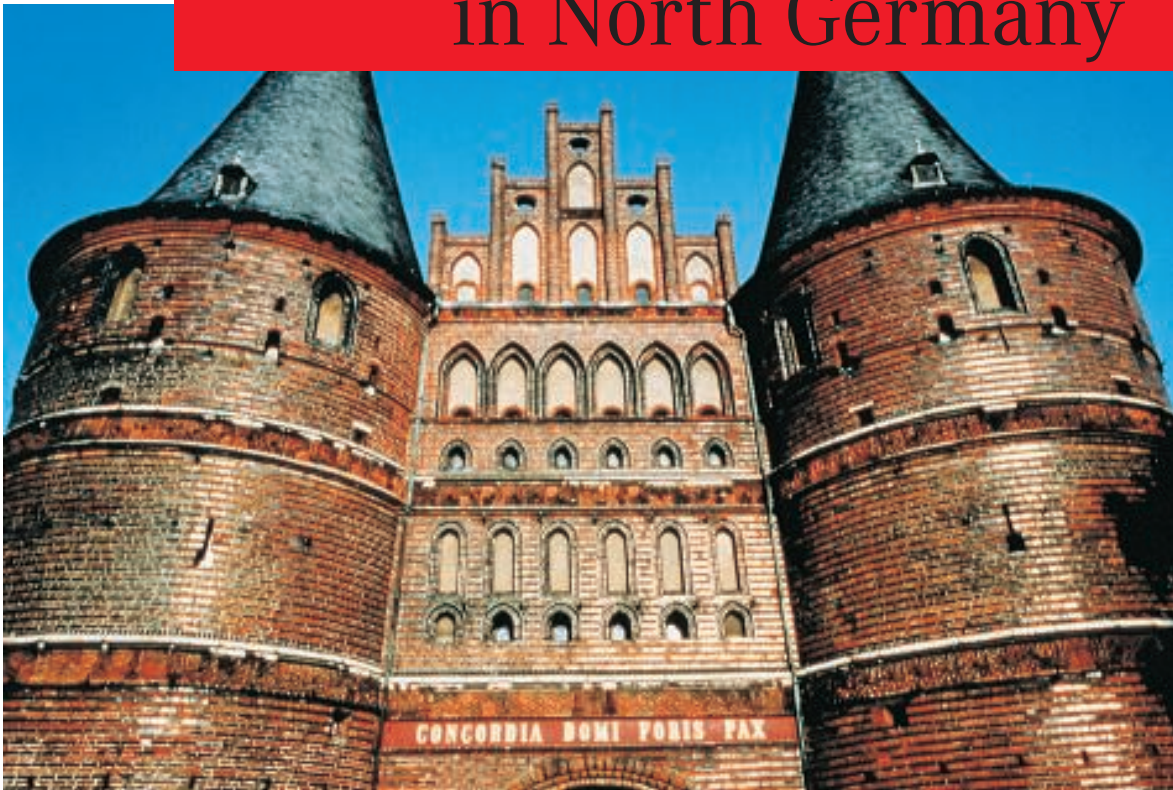


# Doing Business in North Germany



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Doing business in North Germany might look similar to other countries - anyhow it requires careful attention to some cultural differences as Dr. Stefan Goes from Lübeck-based *communicare* points out:

## Appointment Alert!

### Making Appointments

Making business appointments in Germany is much the same as in other European countries.

If it's a contact made by phone, you will want to address the secretary or assistant. Just as usual, you will state your name, company and the purpose of your call. The more you will trust in the assistant's competence and authority to deal with your request, the more likely your success will be.

Try to offer two to three different days to chose from and try to fix the time of day between 9:30 and 11:00 a.m. or after 4:30 p.m.: The mornings and late afternoons are high status times for more important meetings. Try not to be too accommodating regarding the placement of the appointment. In Germany, this will rather be regarded as a sign of too much free time in your calendar - i.e. low status - than of politeness. In case you've met before, it's best, of course, to let the assistant know of this occasion, or you

might of course try to speak the desired partner personally.

In case you and your partner would like to agree on a date at the end of a face-to-face-conversation, it's best to ask your partner for her/his preferences. Appointments for lunch are a good choice when you are not too deep into negotiations yet. Otherwise, meetings at the office or in a private space in your hotel (apart from your rooms) will be preferable. Usually, the host will pay for drinks and food.

Private Appointments: You might want to pay a visit to an acquaintance of yours from a previous stay - no problem! Just go ahead as described above, choosing lunch, after work or early evening time slots. Appointments with the opposite sex are no problem for lunch or after work; if you want to make a dinner appointment, you might want to offer your partner to bring someone along. The other way around feel free to accept this offer yourself. Let your partner suggest a place to meet and don't be shy to state your preferences regarding type of place and/or type of food, for example. Real „Lübeckers“ will be glad, though, if you let them decide, because everyone's so proud of their city. Don't hesitate to ask for a description of how to get there.

Doing business in North Germany requires careful attention to detail - this fact sheet delivers the necessary background information



## Conversation – Welcome Topics

While talking about business matters, it's not hard to find the right topic, naturally. But the socially helpful small talk going with business deals or often dominating receptions and dinner invitations will regularly lack interesting or emotionally bonding topics. So here's a small flock of willing sheep of speech easy to herd into a nice conversation – so your partners in Lübeck won't have to succumb to wool-gathering at the table.

Travel: Since you have come from foreign parts, one of the most obvious topics is travel. And with this I don't mean the difficulties of travel, but charming episodes or encounters. Beautiful and interesting things you have seen.

Art: Who is your favourite painter or sculptor? To which exhibitions have you been lately? Which fine art ist to be seen in your home town?

Music: Which concerts have you heard last? Did you buy some new music? Which composers do you like best and why?

Architecture: Which is your favourite style in architecture (maybe there's a difference between private, public and office buildings)? Which interesting houses have you seen in Lübeck? What do you want to know about them?

History: Are there any historical ties between your home town or province and Lübeck? Do you notice similarities between the history of your country, province, town

and (northern) Germany or Lübeck? Maybe one of your ancestors is from Germany?

Culture of Living: Which special dishes are served at home? What do you like to do in your spare time? How are houses furnished? Is there a special style? What do gardens look like?

At the end, maybe a few words on do's and don't's, if you like.

Most peoples' innermost motive for social action is the need to be appreciated as a good or even lovable person. So, instead of going on endlessly about what riveting secrets you know, let your partners tell you what they know. Thus, they can impress you and themselves with their knowledge. Ask questions beginning with w: Which, where, who, what, how ;-), when and so on.

Never emphasize your own role/part in a story – especially, if you feel to have been the hero. This might seem slightly immodest. Also, it could easily provoke your male German counterpart to start a bragging contest, and let your female German partner slowly retreat from the conversation.

Refrain from topics such as past and current politics, gender, disease or, most horrible: business!

## First Name or Title – Addressing Others with Respect

Well, let's see – whom are you most likely to meet and in which circumstances? In most cases, the occasion will be a

business meeting or a meeting in a restaurant with business partners. Here, Germans – and especially real Hanseats – will tend to be a bit more on the formal side. So don't be astounded if you're addressed with your whole bunch of titles – for greetings and for goodbyes along with your last name, while being addressed in conversation often only with title. Not only because this is a common way to show respect, but also because most people like to be surrounded by important people. This makes them feel more important in turn. In Germany, status is felt to be based mainly on personal achievements or – interestingly enough – social status, e.g. aristocracy or the like. And this is felt to be documented by titles. The tricky thing is: Germans will most seldomly make themselves acquainted other than with (first and) last name. Sometimes they will even kind of bark their last name at you without the least hint of a smile. This is not meant to frighten you off, nor a sign of personal reserve, but simply culture. Maybe it's supposed to express modesty and dignity. But now back to titles: You will never know how someone would care to be addressed until it's too late. To be on the safe side, best start out using (the highest) title + last name and work your way along in conversation trusting your social competence. Partners with no special titles are best addressed with Mr./Herr resp. Mrs./Frau + last name. Which leads us to the Sie-Du-Trap.

In English, everyone is addressed with 'you' in context with first or last name. This has historic reasons: /you/ corresponds to /Sie/, which in both cases is the grammatical form for addressing more than one person – and now also the 'polite' address. The German /du/ has its English counterpart in the archaic /thou/. This 'thou' was banned by royal decree in early modern England, when members of certain christian minorities started addressing everyone with this pronoun as a sign of equality – even their lords. Cultures robbed by language change, royalty and/or socialism (petit joke here) of their 'polite' or 'personal' pronouns have found more sublime ways to show distance and closeness with language. Germans, on the other hand, never yet really on the sublime side, will readily mistake a foreigner's offer to address him or her with their first names (along with the /you/) with an offer of friendship or comradery. To make a long story short:

When speaking English with your German partners, think twice about using or offering conversation on first-name-basis. When dealing with Germans in their mother tongue, remember that – since /du/ is usually only used for friends and family – you might rather want to stick to /Sie/ + last name. But don't get uptight now – here's a sample of German humour for you: A popular quip we tell each other in English regarding our troubles with the you-trap goes thus: „You can say you to me!“

### **Let's Make a Deal! Useful Information Preparing for Negotiations**

Maybe you are expecting remarks on how to deal with the German businessperson per se. Sorry! There would be a whole book to write, because, as you know from your own personal experience, although certain traits are to be found in negotiations with members of a specific culture, nowadays, and especially in Europe, these characteristics are not easily identified. Furthermore, the ethics and personalities of your partners will play an important role. And then, of course, the dimensions of the deal and the size of the companies involved take a large impact on the proceedings. Maybe there will be lawyers and other consultants at the table. So. What is there to do? Let me tell you a story:

A couple of years ago one of my smaller German customers wanted to sell a subsidiary to a large U.S. company. Information were exchanged, the subsidiary was assessed, a letter of intent was drawn. The Americans had been over two times already and were anxious to close the deal. All the while they had been acting in a kind of stern, fatherly manner, not without being very charming and friendly.

My customer wasn't sure what to make of this method. For the last day of negotiations I offered to sit in and do just one thing: to closely observe the Americans in their verbal and nonverbal action. During the breaks we then would assess my observations and try to

formulate the fitting strategic approach. Said and done.

In very short time the roles on the other side were identified: Senior Exec. = fatherly friend, Junior Exec. = benevolent critic, German Lawyer = terrier and bad child. Their strategy: to emphasize the weaknesses of the subsidiary and the risks of certain legal settings as well as to stress the rather minimal general importance of the acquisition for the American company. In the beginning, this worked out just fine: The German party tried to dissipate the doubts and play down the criticism. A sure loser position. Like sailing in the turbulences of the lee position, neither able to pass in lee, nor to gain the windward side. Always reacting. So we changed tack.

The fatherly friend was addressed charmingly, but only on irrelevant aspects. The benevolent critic was met with critical questions in return. And the terrier was put to his place in the true sense of the word. Having thus made them unsure, the German Chief of Development asked the Junior Exec. almost in an aside comment how they were getting along themselves with the development of a similar technology. And he replied: „Well, we're stu/ we're currently working on the electronic lay-out of the stabilizer.“ He had almost said: „We are stuck.“. In the next break I pointed out this observation to my customer. They hadn't noticed, being too occupied with the complexity of the deal. We agreed that they would now act much less compromising and would stick

to their initial price tag. This approach made them earn quite a bit more money than planned.

So here's my idea: In dealing with business partners, pay close attention to what they really do. What they do with words. How statements on the one hand and questions on the other are employed tactically. Try to find out their aims. Don't stick to a course which doesn't let you sail in free wind. Ask questions. Know how to put in precise words your business proposition. Be charming, yet straightforward and true to your word.

### **Prosperous Entertaining – Entertaining for Business Success**

When travelling abroad on business, there always comes this irksome time when there's just no more work to do. Then you can relax and have a look at the town you're in. Or, you may only semi-relax, because you're going out with your business partners. In Germany, most often you will be invited to a social activity ranging from going out to dinner, over taking a tour of the town, up to seeing a show. And then, again, you might get the notion to entertain your German business partners yourself. Good idea, but tricky navigation. Have a look at these navigational parameters:

The Golden Rule: In Hanseatic towns like Lübeck, understatement is the word of the day. While entertaining, be modest, yet show a subtle sense of class and style.

Whom to invite: In general, you will invite everyone you have been doing business with that day – and I mean business, not just meeting while being shown around the company, for example. In case you want to meet only with the partner(s) on your own status level, ask them at a time when no-one around might feel offended by being left out. When you've met the spouses of one or more partners, you might want to invite them along – but this really only if your partner is along, too, and when the party will be composed of couples at the end. Else you're in for awkward situations with guaranteed unwelcome switches between 'we are at a business dinner' and 'we are here as private persons'. You don't want to invite partners of lower status without their boss (corresponding to your status), and you don't want to invite partners of higher status without having conferred with their staff (at your status-level).

What to do: As a guest to your foreign partner's country, you don't have many choices of activities. It's really only lunch, sundowners and/or dinner. Everything else might seem pretentious or presumptuous. Only when you are well acquainted, your stay lasts for more than a day or two and your host has treated you to something really extra-ordinary in advance, you might consider to charter a boat for an afternoon, for example, or to invite everyone to a show.

Where to go: Impress your German partners by having done thorough

research on nice places to go. Of course, you can take a tour of the web, or you just ask your partner's assistant. You might also take them to a place you found the other night.

How to proceed: Offer the invitation well in advance. That is, when you propose to have drinks after work, ask during the last break or at the end of the day. When you want to host dinner, you might want to ask during the afternoon, but best during lunch. When you wish to surprise everyone with that boat you have chartered for Saturday, you will ask a few days ahead of time.

The place you choose should offer excellent service and fine food, but it shouldn't be in reference class, so to speak. Take care to judge the right level of luxury in comparison with the places your German partners have taken you. Have a look at the place before you go there, and reserve a quiet table.

Rocks to founder upon: Failing to match the people you invite to the people your hosts ask along when they are paying for the fun. Being too early or too late with your invitation. Trying to know your partners' town better than they. Failing to match the kind of invitation to the importance of the business being conducted. Trying to out-do your hosts in terms of generosity, ingenuity or class. Entering a contest of impressive entertainment with your German hosts. Laying it on too thick.

This FactSheet has been prepared by communicate. Its aim is to provide background information for doing business in North Germany.

It is written in general terms and is not intended to be comprehensive. Before taking decisions advice should be sought from

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