

Business etiquette, language & culture

Overview

The key to success in the Qatari market hinges on the relationships and trust UK companies can build with contacts in the marketplace. It is an old fashioned business culture where personal relationships matter far more than other pure commercial considerations. Business is done face-to-face (e-mail is disliked by many Qatari businessmen) and it matters to the local market that suppliers and providers show some commitment to the Qatar economy and marketplace.

Qatar is an Islamic country and follows Sharia Law. Despite rapid economic and social change, Qatar continues to attach great importance to traditional Arab and Islamic values that consider the family to be a central pillar of society. You should respect and be aware of local traditions and sensitivities and always behave and dress modestly, particularly when visiting religious sites and during the holy month of Ramadan. Status and respect are very important in Qatar.

Ramadan

During Ramadan eating and drinking between sunrise and sunset is forbidden for Muslims. If you are a non-Muslim visitor, as a sign of respect you should refrain from eating or drinking in public between sunrise and sunset too, although there are some establishments that cater for non-Muslim visitors during this time.

Language

English is widely spoken but it is mandatory for businesses in Qatar to use Arabic as the main language for issuing invoices, service lists, product labels and customer services. Therefore it helps to have a working knowledge of the language. If not, you should consider hiring a professional interpreter for your meetings. DIT at the British Embassy can provide a list of local translators or interpreters. See also: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/qatar-list-of-lawyers>.

It is recommended that you have one side of your business card printed in Arabic.

Dress

When in Qatar you should dress modestly in public. Local women are often completely veiled but non-Qatari women should wear dresses that cover their shoulders, upper arms and legs above the knees. Men can wear traditional suit trousers, although it may be too warm for a jacket as well.

Greetings

Handshakes are the norm, although some women are not comfortable with this – men should wait to see if a woman extends her hand first. Occasionally some Qataris will prefer not to shake hands but instead hold their hand on their chest. This is a perfectly acceptable form of greeting too.

The customary greeting is "As-salam alaikum," (peace be upon you) to which the reply is "Wa alaikum as-salam," (and upon you be peace). When entering a meeting, general introductions will begin with a handshake. You should greet each of your Qatari counterparts individually.

When you are in Qatar, especially on business, traditional Qatari coffee may be offered to you in offices and at Arabs' homes. Offering coffee as a gesture of welcome is symbolic of hospitality.

Meetings

The working week traditionally starts on Sunday and ends on Thursday. Friday and Saturday are the official days of rest, although in some cases, people – including many non-government offices – will work on Saturday.

You will need introductions to develop your business in this market. You must take time to get to know your contacts through face-to-face meetings.

As in other countries, more than anything it is important to target the right person in your contacts, the decision-maker. It is also preferable to establish new business contacts via an introduction by mutual contact, exhibitions, networking receptions or through the Embassy in the form of an Overseas Market Introduction Service (OMIS). Through an OMIS, the Embassy in Qatar can provide a programme-arranging service, whereby your company would be introduced to the most appropriate contacts and an appointment can be confirmed on your behalf.

Face-to-face meetings are preferred as phone or emails are sometimes seen as impersonal. Appointments should be made no more than two weeks in advance and confirmed a few days before the actual meeting as priorities may change. It is useful to allocate extra time in case the meeting should go on longer or start later than anticipated. Morning and early evenings are the most usual times for meetings, but make sure you avoid prayer times when scheduling. The pace of life is slower in the Gulf, and punctuality is not a particularly high priority. However, you should try to be punctual to create a good impression.

During meetings you should:

- exchange business cards immediately after introductions, presenting with both hands or with the right
- do not offer anything with your left hand, nor receive anything with your left hand
- keep cards on the table, do not put them away immediately

It is advised that you consult a lawyer prior to signing an agreement in Qatar. A list of lawyers is available from the British Embassy Doha, or at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/qatar-list-of-lawyers>.

Summary

Qataris prefer to do business with people they know and trust. Personal contact with potential and existing partners/clients and regular visits to Qatar are of the utmost importance and it is natural for the business relationship to be built over time.

Remember, relationships are most important. You should show long-term commitment to Qatar and your Qatari contacts – keep in touch between contracts or projects.

Qatari public holidays

2018

Date:

Holiday:

Tuesday 18th December

National Day Qatar

2019

Date:

Holiday:

Tuesday 12th February

National Sports Day

Sunday 5th May

Start of Ramadan (Eid al Fitr)

Tuesday 4th June

End of Ramadan begins (Eid al Fitr)

Thursday 6th June

End of Ramadan ends (Eid al Fitr)

Saturday 10th August

Start of Eid al Adha (Feast of Sacrifice)

Monday 12th August

End of Eid al Adha (Feast of Sacrifice)

Wednesday 18th December

National Day Qatar

(NB some dates may be subject to change)

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