

## Doing Business in the United Arab Emirates – Smart “Must Do” Strategies

By **Jessika M. Ferm**

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a fascinating country that includes the larger-than life city of Dubai, the government and banking powerhouse of Abu Dhabi, and the serene ocean views of Fujairah as well as five other unique emirates.

In addition to the glimmering cities, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) offers a melting pot of cultural influences through its vast expat community and its unique “middle east meets west” business climate. If it weren’t for the desert and the Emirati national dress (women wear the black Abaya robe and Shela scarf to cover hair and body, men wear the distinguished Kandora or dishdash robe ranging from white to brown depending on the season and the Guthra headscarf), you may think you were doing business in any major western city.

Don’t let the appearingly casual and unassuming business climate fool you. Emiratis (UAE Nationals) are a proud and family-centered people who take great care in selecting business associates and friends. Before leaving for the UAE on business, follow these smart strategies:

**1. Leave the travel books at the library. Visit websites and blogs to get the “real” information you need.** While travel books and tourist information may provide general overviews, the information is often outdated and overly formal. Visit websites like: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_Arab\\_Emirates](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Arab_Emirates) and blogs like: <http://grapeshisha.blogspot.com/> to get the real “flavor” of the country and its people.

**2. Get an Arabic language tape or find a Gulf Arabic-speaking person to teach you basic phrases.** In the UAE business world, almost all people speak English and they are likely to greet you in English. You will make a tremendous impression by returning the greeting in Arabic and continuing to greet people by saying: “as-salaamu `alaykum” (spelled phonetically). Once there, ask to learn one new phrase a day and practice using the new phrases often. What better way to show your host and business partners that you are making a long-term commit-

ment to your relationship?

**3. Pack business clothing that covers as much skin as possible (especially for women).** Compared to other Middle East countries (like Saudi Arabia or Iran), the UAE is more open and casual when it comes to dressing for business and vacation. While staying at a hotel, you will see a wide range of outfits. Don’t let this lead you to believe that it is socially accepted to wear clothing showing too much skin in the general public.

Men have an easier time as business suits are perfectly acceptable while visiting clients. For women it can be a bit trickier. If you are visiting a business that is a western-based and predominantly run by expats, you will see a much more causal business dress code. Women are more likely to wear skirts (without pantyhose), short sleeve shirts, and tops that are sometimes cut low (even by American standards). Avoid this “faux pas” and dress conservatively in a business suite with long pants, shoes with covered toes, and a top or shirt that doesn’t show skin pass the collarbone. A Pashmina scarf is a great addition to pack as it can serve to cover both head and body when needed. You never know who you will meet and being respectfully of the culture of the UAE and its people should be your number one priority.

**4. Leave the alcohol at home.** It may appear obvious that you shouldn’t bring alcohol into a country where it is illegal to drink in public (except in hotels) but it bears repeating. While it is legal to bring a certain amount from duty free, avoid it as any mishandling (even if unintended) can have serious repercussions (such as imprisonment and deportation). When going out to dinner with business associates, avoid drinking alcohol even if other westerners do.

**5. Learn about your host’s business, family, and experiences.** Nowadays finding information about a person is but a “Google” away. Remember to do your research before leaving. Emiratis engage in long-term business relationships with people they consider friends. By showing a genuine interests in them, their busi-

ness, culture, and country you will find it easier to connect. Search for such things as where they went to school, work history, political and governmental engagements, and published writings and ask additional questions when appropriate.

*Jessika M. Ferm is the President of J.Ferm, LLC, an international leadership consulting firm and is the trusted adviser to leaders and managers ranging from Fortune 100 companies to start ups. She can be reached at (614) 441-8972 or [jessika@jferm.com](mailto:jessika@jferm.com).*

