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Introduction

The original email (shown below for reference) from Tom Black to Jaime Servantes fails to consider the cultural differences between the US and Mexico and also lacks a simple sense of professionalism. It is overly casual and uses idiomatic phrases specific to American English. This seems an inappropriate thing to do when addressing someone of a different culture as the intended message of an idiom or metaphorical expression may be lost in translation. The email, also typical of American style, jumps straight into business with no introductory material and assumes that the reader is aware of and up to date on project information. The original email seems poorly thought out with almost no consideration towards addressing someone of another culture, especially when the writer is requesting that the reader submit a proposal for a presumptively new business venture.

Original Email

Dear Jaime:

Because of the on-again/off-again haggling with one of our subcontractors, we have been putting off writing to you. We were royally turned off by their shoddy merchandise, the excuses they made up, and the way they put down some of our customers. Since we have our good name to keep up, we have decided to take the bull by the horns and see if you would be interested in bidding on the contract for spare parts.

By playing ball with us, your products are sure to score big. So please give it your best shot and fire off your price list ASAP. We will need it by 4/8 if you are to be in the running.

Yours,

Tom Black

Individualistic versus Collective Cultures

The US is traditionally considered an individualistic culture. Individualistic cultures value the “I” over the group. As Thatcher explains, “Individualism exists when people see themselves as primarily independent of others and define themselves, see the world through, and negotiate life based on individual identities and efforts.” (Thatcher, 175) The communication patterns of individualistic cultures tend to make their own lives easier by way of their writing and communication. They assume the reader is current on basic information, they are direct and to the point, introductory material that would be considered “fluff” is left out of technical or professional communications. As Thatcher bluntly points out, individualistic communicators present a “dumbed-down readership level so as to uncomplicate the interpersonal dependence of communicators.” (175)

In contrast to individualistic cultures, collective cultures view individuals as part of the larger group. They are dependent on social and familial groups. Thatcher states that collective cultures, “view themselves as highly dependent upon others and define themselves, see the world, and negotiate life based on social or family groups.” (176) One aspect of the collective culture is that they tend to also be diffuse, meaning they tend towards a more public and social approach to the degrees of involvement across different aspects of life. In diffuse cultures, things like friendships, social relationships, and work environments often cross boundaries and merge together. Diffuse cultures use communication approaches that focus on

the relationship between writer and reader. They include introductory material that would be seen as unnecessary in US writing. Thatcher states that “diffuse patterns seem (to specific people) very indirect and to circle around the point, because diffuse communicators need to understand the whole person before getting to the point.” (179)

Idiomatic Phrases and Tone

The use of idioms and metaphorical phrases in the original email seems very casual and unprofessional, especially given that this email is intended to solicit a new business proposal from a prospective international client. It is typically frowned upon in US technical and business writing to use such a casual tone unless you personally know the client and are comfortable enough in that relationship to be so informal. Using phrases like “royally turned off” and “shoddy merchandise” give off an air of carelessness and imply a lack of respect for the other party, even if that was unintentional. The email is littered with idioms, which can be a difficult habit to break as they are used quite frequently in American English. However, it is important to keep in mind that idioms usually don’t translate well, and phrases such as “take the bull by the horns” or “play ball with us/score big” may confuse international audiences.

Style

The style and format of the original email follow a very typical (albeit informal) American standard. The email is very direct and jumps right into the business at hand, there is no introduction of any kind. The writer assumes that the reader is fully aware of the information they are corresponding about, and thus assumes there is no need for an explanation. Many other cultures (typically collective/diffuse cultures) prefer that technical writings contain introductory material that is not typical in American English technical writings, as St. Amant points out, “Individuals from Japanese or Latin cultures, however, often begin professional documents with a paragraph or section containing polite, solicitous comments that do not seem to relate to the logical development of the greater written presentation.” (St. Amant, 299) Thatcher also points out in his research, that when revising an email for a Mexican audience he included a personal introduction, gave specific information about the project, and used a more formal tone (171). Even though the individuals receiving the email were familiar with the project, the Mexican nationals were used to receiving technical and professional documents in this manner, and thus expected as much. Additionally, St. Amant points out that whether reading or writing in another language, an individual still prefers rhetorical patterns from his or her own culture and will make judgements of technical documentation based on their own experiences and cultural preferences of rhetorical expression (298).

Conclusion

The original email from Tom Black to Jaime Servantes does not meet the cultural preferences and expectations of an international audience. The tone and style are far too casual and unprofessional for the context in which it is written (to solicit a new business proposal), and the author makes no attempt to conform to Mexican communication patterns. The following revision is an attempt to better suit a Mexican audience.

Email Revision

Dear Mr. Servantes,

Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Thomas Black, and I am the international accounts representative for Vandelay Industries, Inc. The two of us met a few months ago at the International Sales Conference for Electrical Equipment Suppliers. While at the conference, we discussed the possibility of a business partnership in the future. I am writing to you today in the hopes that we can further explore options to move forward as business partners.

Recently, Vandelay Industries has experienced difficulties with one of our subcontractors. We have received service that is well below our company standards and have received complaints from our customers regarding their treatment by this same subcontractor. In an effort to uphold our standard of service and commitment to our customers, we have decided to end our relationship with this subcontractor.

Mr. Servantes, your company's reputation is well known in this industry. You provide your customers with excellent service and uphold a rigorous standard of services and values that Vandelay Industries would be proud to be partnered with. We would be honored if you would consider submitting a bidding contract for this newly opened subcontractor position.

I would be very happy to meet with you in person to discuss this business venture in greater detail. Please contact me at your earliest convenience to set up a meeting. I look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully yours,

Thomas Black

(314) 555.3377

References

Thatcher, B. *Understanding digital literacy across cultures*. (pp. 169-197). Retrieved September 9, 2020 from <https://asu.instructure.com/courses/51788/files/15456400/download?wrap=1>.

St. Amant, K., "When Culture and Rhetoric Contrast: Examining English as the International Language of Technical Communications," *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, vol. 42 (4), 297-300 1999.