

Taking Charge in Japan

This article is a summary of a section of Thomas Nevins' new book *Taking Charge in Japan*. (*Japan Times* Dec., 1990). This piece deals with problems we have probably all experienced and is aimed at making the executive a more attractive, accessible, and effective person to do business with.

1. "He knows my number" is inconsiderate and not even true.

The party you have called doesn't "know" your number, unless he has committed it to memory, which is unlikely. It's much better to get in the habit of saying it each time, taking three to five seconds, rather than forcing your party or your party's secretary to look it up, which will take considerably longer. When people have 20 minutes between meetings and 10 messages on their desks, the ones with numbers get called back.

2. Make it easy for them to give you their money.

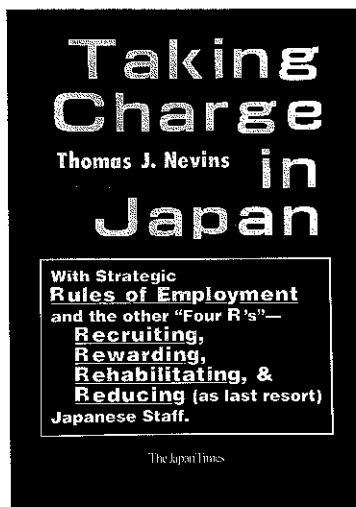
For the sake of accuracy and to help ensure that you'll be called back, leave only the spelling of your last name, your company name, and your phone number. First names can become confusing; however, if the other party is supposed to be on a first-name basis with you, spell out both your first and last names.

3. First name, not initials, on the business card.

Especially if you are dealing with Americans, Canadians, Australians or others who are likely to move to a first name basis, be sure you provide your first name for convenience and courtesy.

4. Put address and phone and fax numbers on everything.

Japanese are very good at this—they want to make it easy for you to do business with them. It amazes me that although virtually all of our foreign-capitalized clients in Japan now have faxes, probably less than one-third have their fax number printed on their stationery and business cards, and some even fail to provide it when they fax you! This is sloppy, insensitive, and bad business.



5. Don't wait too long to get on the line.

Once your secretary gets past the other party's secretary, get on the line and wait. When the Japanese executive comes on, speaking his best English, he does not want to talk to your secretary. Even if his secretary comes back on, it won't hurt you to talk to her—if you're friendly, it could even help you later on.

6. Make detailed maps and directions to your office.

We all know that Tokyo and other Japanese cities are hard to find our way around in. But did you know that the Japanese have just as much difficulty? Make clear, detailed maps so they can find you easily. And make them bilingual.

7. Treat everyone like they are the most important person in your life.

Learn your client's secretary's name and use it. She'll put you at the top of the callback list and see that your faxes and letters are on top of the pile. Remember that today's junior support people will be the decision makers and buyers tomorrow. Even today, their influence may be greater than you think.

8. Don't underestimate the power of apology.

Unlike Japanese, you don't have to accept the blame for something you didn't do, but you should apologize sincerely and insist that you will correct the problem. In

the Japanese context, however, it's better to make a categorical apology. After all, the Japanese receiving it knows that you are personally not to blame.

9. Every day ask yourself, "How can we improve our service?"

Japanese are very good about not worrying about today's income or profits. They just keep increasing their levels of service and quality. If you fail to give service after the sale, or give shabby service, you will not be around for long.

10. Go for the hard ones.

Too many Western companies take the easy way out by leaving their business solely up to a distributor or by hiring a Japanese executive and leaving him alone with the business. You have to do your homework, ask the tough questions, check the accounts, and ruffle some feathers when necessary. It's your investment, so stay on top of it.

11. Remember that you're in business for yourself.

Think of yourself and your career as your business—develop yourself and see that your stock increases in value. Like your company, you as an individual must continue to grow while you are stationed abroad.

12. A successful posting is a succession of successful days.

As an expatriate stationed in Asia, you are on the front line in the most competitive and fastest growing region in the world. The obstacles seem enormous and corporate attention is focused on you. Don't be overwhelmed or discouraged; just take it one day at a time. Get the little things right and the big things will fall into place.

Thomas J. Nevins is Founder and President of TMT, Inc., a Tokyo-based personnel policy consulting (rules of employment, compensation, terminations, staff reductions, union relations), and executive search firm. He is the author of several books, including Labor Pains and the Gaijin Boss (Japan Times, 1984).