

Netherlands

The People

The Dutch society is egalitarian and modern. The people are modest, tolerant, independent, self-reliant, and entrepreneurial. They value education, hard work, ambition and ability. The Dutch have an aversion to the nonessential. Ostentatious behavior is to be avoided. Accumulating money is fine, but spending money is considered something of a vice. A high style is considered wasteful and suspect. The Dutch are very proud of their cultural heritage, rich history in art and music and involvement in international affairs.

Meeting and Greeting

- Shake hands with everyone present -- men, women, and children -- at business and social meetings. Shake hands again when leaving. Introduce yourself if no one is present to introduce you. The Dutch consider it rude not to identify yourself.
- The Dutch will shake hands and say their last name, not "Hello." They also answer the telephone with their last name.
- It is considered impolite to shout a greeting. Wave if greeting someone from a distance.

Body Language

- The Dutch are reserved and don't touch in public or display anger or extreme exuberance.
- The Dutch value privacy and seldom speak to strangers. It is more likely that they will wait for you to make the first move. Don't be afraid to do so.
- The Dutch expect eye contact while speaking with someone.
- Moving your index finger around your ear means you have a telephone call, not "you're crazy." The crazy sign is to tap the center of your forehead with your index finger. This gesture is very rude.

Corporate Culture

- The Dutch take punctuality for business meetings very seriously and expect that you will do likewise; call with an explanation if you are delayed.
- Lateness, missed appointments, postponements, changing the time of an appointment or a late delivery deteriorates trust and can ruin relationships.
- Exchange business cards during or after conversation. No set ritual exists. Business cards in English are acceptable.
- The Dutch are extremely adept at dealing with foreigners. They are the most experienced and most successful traders in Europe.
- The Dutch tend to get right down to business. Business negotiations proceed at a rapid pace.
- Presentations should be practical, factual and never sloppy.
- An individual's cooperation and trust are valued over performance. One-upmanship is frowned upon.
- The Dutch tend to be direct, giving straight "yes" and "no" answers.
- The Dutch are conservative and forceful and can be stubborn and tough negotiators. They are willing to innovate or experiment, but with minimal risk.

- Companies are frugal and careful with money. Business is profit-oriented with the bottom line being very important. However, the Dutch are not obsessed with numbers.
- Strategy is cautious and pragmatic, usually involving step-by-step plans. Preparations are made to improvise the plan, if needed. Strategy is clear and communicated to all levels.
- In many companies the decision-making process is slow and ponderous, involving wide consultation. Consensus is vital. The Dutch will keep talking until all parties agree.
- Once decisions are made, implementation is fast and efficient.
- In the Netherlands, commitments are taken seriously and are honored. Do not promise anything or make an offer you are not planning to deliver on.

Dining and Entertainment

- To beckon a waiter or waitress, raise your hand, make eye contact, and say *ober (waiter) or mevrouw (waitress)*.
- It is appropriate to discuss business during lunch. Business breakfasts are not very common.
- Most business entertaining is done in restaurants, but the Dutch do a fair amount of entertaining at home as well.
- The Dutch will make it clear that you are their guest if they intend to pay the bill, otherwise expect to "go Dutch" and pay your fair share. No one will be embarrassed at splitting the bill.
- Spouses are often included in a business dinner. Ask if your host expects your spouse included in a business function. Business is not generally discussed if spouses are present.
- Dutch manners are frank -- no-nonsense informality combined with strict adherence to basic etiquette.
- Food does not play the major role in hospitality that it does in many other cultures. It is not considered essential for making someone feel welcome. Do not expect to be served a meal unless the invitation specifically mentions a meal.
- Men should wait until all women are seated before they sit. Allow the hostess to start eating and drinking before you eat.
- Take a small quantity of food to start. A second helping will be offered and it is polite to accept.
- Keep your hands on the table at all times during a meal -- not in your lap. However, take care to keep your elbows off the table.
- Use knife and fork to eat all food including sandwiches, fruit and pizza.
- To signify that you would like more food or that you are not finished, cross your knife and fork in the middle of your plate in an X.
- It is considered rude to leave the table during dinner (even to go to the bathroom).
- When finished eating, place your knife and fork side by side at the 5:25 position on your plate.
- Parties may go very late. Plan to stay for an hour or so after dinner.
- Do not ask for a tour of your host's home; it is considered impolite.

Dress

- The Dutch prefer fashions that are casual, unpretentious, conservative and subdued.
- A traditional suit and tie is required only in certain circles of business and government.
- When conducting business in the Netherlands, foreign men may wear suits and ties, though sport coats are acceptable. Women should wear suits or dresses.
- Taking off your jacket in an office is acceptable. It means getting down to business. Do not roll up the sleeves of your shirt. When leaving an office, put your jacket back on.

Gifts

- Gifts are generally not given or expected at business meetings.
- Gifts are exchanged in business only once a close, personal relationship has developed.
- The Dutch find any form of ostentation a bit embarrassing. A grand gesture of generosity will only make them uncomfortable. Lavish displays of wealth are considered bad taste.
- Give books, art objects, wine, liquor. Do not give knives.
- When invited to someone's home, bring a small gift for the hostess. Bring children a small gift or candy. Sending flowers before or after the party is also appropriate.

Helpful Hints

- The Dutch avoid superlatives. Compliments are offered sparingly, and to say that something is "not bad" is to praise it. A person who never offers criticism is seen as either being simple-minded or failing to tell the truth. A foreigner need not worry too much about saying something that will hurt feelings. The Dutch will argue, but seldom take offense.
- Dutch humor is subtle rather than slapstick.
- The Dutch speak directly and use a lot of eye contact. To a foreigner, they may appear abrupt, but it is just their manner of communicating.
- Do not call the Netherlands "Holland." Holland is a region within the Netherlands.
- Smoking is prohibited in many areas. Always ask before lighting up.
- Stand when a woman enters the room.
- Don't chew gum in public.
- Do not discuss money or prices or ask personal questions.
- Keep your hands out of your pockets while talking to someone or shaking hands.

Especially for Women

- The percentage of women who are employed outside the home is one of the lowest in Europe, and those who do work are generally in lower paying jobs.
- Many Dutch women see the struggle for equal opportunities as only just beginning, even though small strides have already been made. Equality of women is a policy priority.
- Foreign women will not have trouble doing business in the Netherlands.
- It is common and acceptable for businesswomen to invite a man to dinner.
- Businesswomen will have no problem paying for a meal in a restaurant.

Adapted from material compiled by Window on the World, a cross-cultural training and consulting firm. Originally based on material contained in the "Put Your Best Foot Forward" series of books by [Mary Murray Bosrock](#).