

Is it time to kiss goodbye to cheek-to-cheek greetings?

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Donald Trump kisses Angela Merkel © Getty

Andrew Hill YESTERDAY

“I have come to realise that a core ingredient of women’s power and even just independence is kissing.”

The email arrived just before lunch. Guests were gathering to offer their advice about themes for the next Financial Times [Women at the Top](#) summit. The distinguished sender could not attend, but she wanted to share her thoughts about the agenda.

Kissing. It was a surprise, but not a shock. The idea of addressing a conference session to the vexed and shifting question of how to greet the people we meet through work had an edgy topicality. The handshake and the kiss — as practised [most weirdly](#) on fellow leaders by Donald Trump — are powerplays. They merit analysis.

I also recognised, as I chatted to other lunch guests, that I needed to grapple with my own greetings stance.

As an uptight British man, I was born with a firm handshake, which I used to apply to close relatives, friends and complete strangers alike.

But when I was posted to Brussels in the 1990s, I had to get to grips with continental European mores. This was hard enough socially. I met my Spanish wife in Belgium and I learnt to brace for repeated cheek-to-cheek contact, sometimes at the first meeting, with her Spanish girlfriends and relations, and even the occasional male in-law.

At work, it was more complicated still. The handshake remained my go-to salute to strangers of both sexes. But it started to seem natural — even sophisticated — to reciprocate the formal continental double-kiss offered by female contacts whom I knew well.

Some colleagues are adamant this is wrong. Jonathan Guthrie, head of the Lex column, [wrote this year](#) about his strict handshake-only approach. He told me recently he still thought anything more intimate was beyond the pale. In 2014, Elaine Moore, now Jonathan's deputy, [issued a clear-cut demand](#) to men to stop welcoming her, occasionally at their first meeting, with a kiss. Such greetings are now increasingly rare, she says.

She was ahead of her time. The #MeToo scandals have rightly highlighted issues of power and consent in all work relationships. Ted Baker had to [appoint a law firm](#) this month to investigate allegations of “forced hugging”, which led to the fashion brand's founder, Ray Kelvin, taking a leave of absence. Another colleague, former retail correspondent Claer Barrett, has described the experience of [being hugged by Mr Kelvin](#) at her first meeting with him. It was, she wrote, “not the oddest thing about him”. But it was still odd.

Eccentric European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker took justifiable flak this month when he [manhandled an angry Theresa May](#) at an EU summit — “a classic alpha-male control gesture”, growled one female executive I know — and was then seen greeting a female colleague by [ruffling her hair](#).

These are liberties no man — or woman, for that matter — should take without permission. Even *with* permission, they cross a line.

Greeting confusion has a long, red-faced history. In Renaissance Britain, there were “a huge number of ways to embarrass yourself” with hand-kissing, according to [a recent book](#) by Ruth Goodman. Oxford university's Juulia Suvilehto, who has [studied social touching](#), advised me it was “important to make sure the greeting is congruent with the relationship between the two parties and with the culture in which it happens”.

I know about consent and I know about boundaries. But I still worry about my options. I could devote a separate column to analysing when a journalist's contact becomes a friend — and if they ever should. Suffice it to say that switching to a handshake to greet some women I know well would be more awkward than accepting the kiss they invariably offer.

Allyson Stewart-Allen, co-author of [Working with Americans](#), told me: “Once you are past the handshake level, everything is up for grabs.” But, as an American who has lived and worked around the world, she also celebrates cultural differences in greeting habits. Her advice is similar to Claer Barrett's: take cues from the other person.

The female executive who took issue with Mr Juncker's handsy approach agrees, offering another example: “You will never stop the Dutch giving you three kisses on the cheek. The safe thing is not to kiss. But we're all people: if it feels right in the circumstances . . .” But it is precisely “the circumstances” that have changed and that make this territory so unstable.

I should obviously declare 2019 the Year of the Handshake. But I can foresee exceptions. I also know you can mess up a greeting by overthinking it. That takes me back to the email that prompted this reflection. Scanning my messages after the lunch, I found an update. Our distinguished guest had meant to write that a core ingredient was *missing*, not kissing.

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