



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

## What can we expect from Biden's America?

**There are some rules for doing business in the USA.**

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The United States has a new president, and Joe Biden and his new Secretary of State Antony Blinken will look to reset and rebuild the country's international relationships. That will leave business leaders in the UK with some questions.

When – and how – will the UK and EU Free Trade Agreements be finalised and what will it mean for any business looking to expand into the world's largest economy?

While there's hope trade is high on the Biden priority list, the new administration is facing many challenges at home, not least the economy, unemployment, healthcare, Covid vaccines rollouts and attempting to reunite a very divided nation.

While the "America is back" message helps start this process, it is also the platform for improving perceptions of the United States in the eyes of international business leaders from pity to positive. Symbolically, the US rejoining the Paris Agreement on climate change, its reinstated membership of the WHO and explicit support of NATO indicate the reengagement of the country to rediscover and reassert its influence.

Alongside this newfound confidence, UK and European business leaders can also expect a new and different US-UK "special relationship" with Biden's administration, which will take a while to build given the priority of American domestic challenges. Biden has called Boris Johnson, alongside the other European leaders, and is expected to visit the UK on first his overseas trip, according to numerous news reports.

Expect, however, that an EU-US Free Trade Agreement will get attention before the UK's is tackled, given the size of the commercial prize for US companies – a trading bloc with nearly 450 million consumers compared to the UK's 67 million.

Additionally, the new US Trade Representative and team, part of the Executive Office of the President and installed after Biden's January 20 inauguration, will wait to watch how the UK-EU trade agreement unfolds to ensure the UK does not put the Good Friday Agreement at risk.

So given this fluid state of US-UK-EU trade relationships, your US focus and growth should continue come what may, since waiting for certainty means losing time to competitors.

### **PLAN, PLAN, PLAN: NAVIGATING US BUSINESS GROWTH**

While being aware of this macro landscape is necessary, it is not sufficient. Knowing how American business culture operates, and negotiating deals within it, separates the winners from the rest.

As a Californian in London for the last 32 years, advising companies on how to break into the US market, I've found one of the most common challenges for companies is building profitable relationships with their US counterparts.

They recognise it is not simply "business as usual" when they work in the US, and must adapt their approaches to marketing, influencing, communicating and negotiating in order to make real headway.

So while we may speak a version of English in the United States, it couldn't be more different from British English. One reason is that American English has evolved to become a fast communication tool as a result of absorbing millions of immigrants whose command of the language was essential if they were to become employable.

Teaching them the subtle and multiple meanings of English words and phrases – for example "I couldn't possibly comment" meaning "yes, but without going on the record" – would not necessarily translate to helping them work faster on an assembly line.

Here are a few other insights to help ensure your success in the world's largest economy:

#### **Keep it simple and measurable**

Americans believe "what you see is what you get", so hidden meanings, irony, implicit or indirect communication will cause delays, misunderstandings and a loss of trust.

British-isms such as "quite" or "rather" sound tentative and indecisive to the US ear. The more explicit and direct (while still diplomatic, of course) your approach, the more interest and attention you'll receive in your negotiations.

#### **Transactions first, relationships second**

The English adage "the early bird gets the worm" is taken more seriously in the US, where business culture rewards those that are first, even if they're not necessarily the best.

So those who can "do the deal" are held in high esteem, often more than those that build deep, engaging personal relationships, which of course require an investment of time - something generally in short supply in the American business culture.

#### **There's no promotion like self-promotion**

To cut through that noisy backdrop, Americans are taught from a young age that the "humble brag" is one of the best ways to let others know about your achievements. It's customary to introduce ourselves with the addition of our recent achievements, awards, latest press coverage, job promotion or other indicator of professional success.

#### **Customised, not bespoke**

US business executives like to know you have configured your solution just for them, that the menu has been designed with them in mind, even if your menu is the one you offer all your customers and clients.

While standardisation is what helped make American business such a significant and often copied powerhouse (thank you, Henry Ford), its economy of abundance means we like to feel invested in the product or service. The more we have a hand in designing it, the more committed we become.

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