

Are Germans Rude?

Are Germans rude? It is a question that Expats often spend a lot time debating. In her regular Expatica column, Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich sets out to answer the question.

Jacqueline wrote:

"How come when I greet a person they do not greet back. I think it is rude and unfriendly!"

Dear Jacqueline and all the others out there who feel that this statement / question was about due for this column.

The answer to this is (do not sigh): "Rudeness is in the eye of the beholder".

Granted, this will not get you further, so let's dig a little deeper. Like every other culture, the Germans also have a code of conduct. But what is polite or impolite is unfortunately not always a 100 per cent compatible across borders.

It all starts with our cultural assumptions or to put it another way the management of our expectations.

When you come from a greeting culture - where you get a smile or a hello back - you have been conditioned to expect just that. Whenever it is not reciprocated, we tend to be quick with a judgement about the other person. It is almost as if your feelings have been hurt.

Stop! Right there!

Do not take this non-greeting personally. Most often it has nothing to do with you, unless someone has a bone to pick with you. This non-greeting reflects nothing more than one of the many cultural differences you experience when living internationally.

This is a very tricky thing to do, as there is the North South East West divide, countryside versus metropolitan and all the other variables that come into play.

But here are some basic guidelines:

- There is no obligation to greet a person you do not know (this goes both ways)
- Germans tend to greet people they do know
- Germans will acknowledge a person they can put into a context. This can be a nod of the head or even half a smile, which means you have been promoted to the upper league
- When Germans smile, it is a 100 per cent heartfelt smile, and not just the flashing of teeth (remember the German thoroughness)
- Germans usually do not smile at strangers

When smiled at by a stranger it may trigger the following (if a little overstated):
German thinks: "Bother, I cannot remember this person. (Worried): "Oh dear! How do I greet this person with Frau `I am sorry- I forgot your name?' No, ordnung muß sein.

So German: "Have we met before. Sie sind die Frau... ? (your name is)"

Greeter: (Baffled) "No, we never met." (Almost apologetic) "I just wanted to be friendly."

Both of them go their separate ways shaking their heads about these strange people.

To end of with a Greek proverb that reflects an appreciation for diversity: "Every Tale can be Told in a different Way"

Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich is managing partner of CONSULTus. Her website is WWW.Consultus.net. She reserves the right to decide which questions she considers relevant for her column. She will, however, not answer any questions dealing with tax or legal matters.