

Pennsylvania

Commentary



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Making Philadelphia more welcoming to foreigners would do wonders for its standing in the global economy.

Open door, see world beat a path

By Nancy Gilboy

In case you haven't noticed, the United States isn't very popular right now. Long before our involvement in Iraq, our image was the "Ugly American" — loud, arrogant, and not interested in other cultures and languages.

This puts us at a tremendous disadvantage, because today's economy is about competition. You can't read Tom Friedman, Richard Florida, or any major newspaper without hearing the wake-up call that we're living in a global economy and there's no turning back.

Foreign companies can choose from more than 100 countries in which to set up operations. Some students who

once wanted an American education now avoid our universities because of visa hassles. And tourists will spend money where it's easy to visit and they feel most welcome.

In today's economy, the country that's the most welcoming and "internationally prepared" will be the

clear economic winner. But we can't wait for the entire United States to change. In a global economy, cities can compete with countries. So let's start right here at home.

How? By becoming language-accessible. By becoming culturally aware. And by fulfilling William Penn's vision for Philadelphia when he arrived here on his ship, the *Welcome*.

Here are five tips (from many more) for Philadelphia to win internationally:

Make Philadelphia the easiest city in the United States for non-English speakers to visit, work in and live in. Offer welcoming and directional signs

in multiple languages at points of entry, cultural attractions, stores, etc. International symbols work, but a winning city makes extra efforts.

Cultural attractions with brochures in other languages send welcoming messages. Plus they would attract our own immigrants. The Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians reports that more than 250,000 Philadelphia residents speak English as a second language. How many are uncomfortable leaving their community because of language barriers? Whether visitors are from overseas or around the block, let's make our attractions language-accessible to all.

Hire multilingual and multicultural employees. Shops, restaurants or any business with multilingual personnel can make more money. It pays to be prepared.

Translate restaurant menus into many languages. Wouldn't you spend more money if you knew what you were ordering?

Become culturally sensitive. Americans assume everyone is just like we are or will adapt to our culture. This attitude hits a raw nerve overseas. Cross-cultural training should go beyond the hospitality industry. Whether you're a manufacturer or a real estate agent meeting foreign executives, awareness of cultural differences determines success. Serve tea to a delegation from South Korea. Ask a Brazilian executive about his family. Display a small country flag for each guest you meet. Small gestures score major points.

Be nice to tourists with maps and cameras. Offer directions to everyone you see with a map. Offer to take photos next time you see people taking turns with a camera in front of the *LOVE* sculpture or anywhere. Whether the visitors are from Orlando or Osaka, these friendly acts send a message about Philadelphians that are

long remembered.

Host an international visitor for dinner. You'll build your international network and understand other cultures by taking an international "influencer" home for dinner. Each year, members of the International Visitors Council cook dinner for hundreds of guests visiting through the State Department — members of parliament, mayors, lawyers, judges, business owners and educators from more than 120 countries. Each visitor's positive image of an American will be quickly exported home to his or her family and friends. And don't forget International House in Philadelphia has students from all over the world who would love to visit an American home.

Offer "shadow days" to international students. The International Visitors Council has already arranged more than 500 internships and shadow days with local companies for State Department guests and Philadelphia's foreign graduate students. The companies that opened their doors gained insights into doing business abroad, added to their global network, and are now more globally prepared than those that haven't — and without the expense of traveling overseas.

It's all about competition. Let's take these first steps to becoming the easiest, most welcoming American city to visit, work in and live in. And the most internationally prepared. A citywide effort makes good civic and economic sense and will create a positive image around the world that lifts Philadelphia high above the others.

Nancy Gilboy has been president of the International Visitors Council of Philadelphia (www.ivc.org) for 16 years, working with State Department and Sister City delegations. She is also the writer and producer of the AudioWalk and Tour of Historic Philadelphia.



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