

Business English

42 Expressions Used in 'Doing Business'

Volume 1



Introduction

Do you work in an English-speaking office?

Maybe you deal with native English business people who use unfamiliar expressions.

It can be frustrating. Especially for someone who is not used to the 'nuances' of the language.

Miscommunication or misunderstanding could cost sales or clients.

How to fix it?

What's the best way to handle this problem? It's easy. Become familiar with the more common expressions used in business today.

Some are well known, so don't be afraid people won't 'get you' when you use them. Others are much newer.

The language of business and general English is evolving. It's best to try and keep up with new words and expressions.

In this article, I'll list no fewer than 42 expressions:

They consist mainly of phrasal verbs and idioms.

Learning them will help you 'get on top of'/'get to grips with' the 'small talk' of Business English.

Let's start with...

6 common words used often in business

- sales (purchases/transactions)
- marketing (advertising/promotions)
- strategy (plan, approach)
- revenue - income, earnings
- profit - gain, return
- margin - difference between costs and income (profit margin)

If you've done a business degree, you'll be familiar with the terminology essential for conducting business:

- Terms of trade (shipping/tariffs/licences etc)
- Creation of, and explaining statistics and charts
- input and output costs, market trends, profit and loss statements etc.
- Business Law (the legal terms associated with doing business)

But these don't concern us here.

Instead, I'll introduce you to....

Learning the 'small talk'

The expressions introduced and explained, with examples, are the 'small talk' of business.

Let's take the idea of 'small talk' further.

There is a whole other area of business that concerns the 'warming up' of clients. This involves having conversations that have nothing to do with 'real' business.

Building relationships with clients helps establish good customer relations. Trust between you or your business and your client base is vital.

But, because of constraints, we won't address that area here.

Instead we'll focus on the 'small talk' of business. It's the expressions used in manager-staff, staff-staff, or staff-client interactions.

Many of the expressions are interchangeable in those just-mentioned interactions.

Here's how I'll lay them out.

First, I'll introduce the phrase. Then, I'll explain what it means. And I'll follow up with an example or two to show the expression in context; that is, how we use it in a sentence.

A tip for you.

Learn the expression and what it means. Don't try to memorise the sentence. The context may change and you don't want to be using it incorrectly.

So, in no particular order, here they are. If there is an obvious grouping, I'll keep those expressions together.

1 blue sky thinking

Synonyms include: brainstorming. creative thinking. imaginative or innovative thinking, out-of-the-box thinking.

"Tomorrow's Business Conference has some big names in business so we can expect lots of big ideas and blue sky thinking."

2 business before pleasure

Meaning: to relax and enjoy after doing the hard part of business

"Let's finalise the deal, then we'll go have dinner. Business before pleasure I say."

3 ballpark figure

Means: An acceptable, roughly accurate approximation. It refers to a baseball field, which is always played in an enclosed space.

"I know you can't tell me the exact cost; just give me a ballpark figure."

4 the bottom line

Meaning: the line at the bottom of a financial report or balance sheet that shows the net profit or loss.

"So you're the accountant, Sally, what's our bottom line?"

5 in the red

Meaning: spending and owing more money than is being earned.

"It seems the company had been in the red for some time before it went out of business a month ago."

For this expression and the one following, traditional accounting practices involved writing credits and debits in a balance sheet in either red (for debits) or black ink (for credits).

6 in the black

Meaning: When a company is in the black, it is said to be profitable, financially solvent, and not overburdened by debt.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I can happily announce that our company, after a long period of being in the red, is now firmly in the black."

7 bring to the table

Meaning: to contribute or supply a valuable ability or quality to a joint work, activity, or attempt. To do something that will benefit others. To make an offer in a discussion or negotiation.

"John, what can you bring to the table?"

8 move the needle/dial

Meaning: Moving the needle means changing a situation to a noticeable degree, and usually implies a positive change. Think of a speedometer in a car, or an arrow pointing to the level of money raised for charity.

"Our efforts this year in improving worker productivity have resulted in our company moving the needle/dial on annual profits."

9 go the extra mile

If you say that someone is willing to go the extra mile, you mean that they are willing to make a special effort to do or achieve something.

"Our business is to go the extra mile for our customers."

10 be ahead of the pack

Meaning: to be more successful than other people who are trying to achieve the same things as you

"We believe our company is ahead of the pack in our field."

11 cut corners

Meaning: to save money or time when doing something by not including some parts, actions, or details.

"If we manage to cut corners in our production process we'll save time and money."

12 from the ground up

13 from scratch

14 from square one

15 from nothing

These mean almost the same thing.

Means: To do/make something from the most basic level to the highest level; completely.

"They designed the company from the ground up."

"This product was developed from scratch. Nothing like it existed before."

"I learned the family business from square one."

"My father built this company from nothing. Now look at it!"

16 get the ball rolling

Means: to set an activity in motion; make a start.

"Ok, each of you has a list of clients to cold-call today. Let's get the ball rolling, people!"

"We have to get the ball rolling on this project soon."

17 back to the drawing board

Means: indicates that an idea, scheme, or proposal has been unsuccessful and that a new one must be devised.

"I guess now that our product has one or two problems, we'll have to go back to the drawing board."

18 back to the grind

Means: what you might say when going back to work or your regular routine after taking a break to travel, spend time with friends or family or catch up on some rest.

"I had a great holiday. But tomorrow, it's back to the grind for me."

19 think outside the box/square (square is used often in Australia)

Means: to think imaginatively using new ideas instead of traditional or expected ideas.

"She encourages companies to think outside the box and challenge the old ways of working."

20 call it a day

Means: decide or agree to stop doing something.

"We've worked very hard on this project today. Let's call it a day and go home."

21 by the book

Means: following the official rules very strictly.

"My boss insists on doing everything by the book."

22 to stay on top of

Means: means to be continuously aware of something and give it your regular attention.

"The stock market has been unpredictable lately, and you really have to stay on top of things."

"Sales have fallen, so we have to stay on top of things to get them moving again. Perhaps try some new strategies."

23 get up to speed

3 meanings:

1 operating at full speed.

2 performing at an anticipated or desired rate or level.

3 (of a person) fully informed or up to date.

"I need to bring you up to speed on the status of our application for planning permission to build the new factory."

24 I see your point

Means: To understand or come to agree with a particular point someone is trying to make. Often said in a polite way before attempting to disagree.

"I see your point, Jack, but have you thought of this other way of thinking?"

25 my/our hands are tied

Meaning: Say this when someone is unable to act freely because something (such as a rule or law) prevents it.

"I'd like to help you, but I'm afraid my hands are tied."

"The client says his hands are tied because the bank requires a much larger deposit."

26 trim the fat

27 cut costs

Both mean the same thing.

They mean: eliminating waste or poorly used resources and focusing those resources where they will improve the business most.

"To stay in business, we must trim the fat. We have no choice but to fire 20 percent of the workforce."

"To cut costs of production, we have to restructure the business."

Means: to convert the debt of a business in difficulty into another kind of debt, typically one that is repayable at a later time.

"Shareholders and creditors have agreed to restructure the company's debts and payment schedules."

28 a long shot

(Originally from shooting: it means to take a shot at a target from a long way away.)

Means: something that is unlikely to succeed, but is worth trying.

"It's a long shot, but you could try phoning him at home."

"He's a difficult customer, so it's a long shot he'll buy anything from you at the moment."

29 touch base

Means: to "make contact" or "reconnect." It's used to describe the act of briefly communicating with someone or something (e.g., a team).

The expression is thought to have originated in the sport of baseball.

"Hey, Martin, I've got a proposition for you. Let's touch base early next week."

30 to corner the market

Means: to control the supply of a product or the ability to sell it.

"The company quickly cornered the market in coffee sales in the US."

"His attempt to corner the copper market resulted in a nearly two-billion dollar loss."

31 put (something) on the back burner

Means: temporarily not being dealt with or considered, especially because it is not urgent or important.

"We've had to put our plans on the back burner for a while until we can secure finance for the project."

32 balls in the air

Used to describe a situation where a person is managing or juggling multiple tasks, responsibilities, or commitments simultaneously.

"With her new job, family responsibilities, and evening classes, Jane has all her balls in the air right now."

"The events coordinator successfully kept all the balls in the air, ensuring that the conference ran smoothly."

33 a win-win situation/proposition

Means: A situation where everyone involved is certain to do well or be successful. Mutually beneficial.

"Flexible working hours are a win-win situation for employers as well as employees."

"Those who support globalization claim that it is a win-win proposition for the rich and the poor."

34 not on my watch

Meaning: When someone says this, it means that they will not allow something to happen, and the intent is that they will be taking action to stop it.

A guard posted to watch over something is said to be on 'watch'. A night watchperson at a factory ensures security of the site is kept when it is not operating.

"It won't happen while I am in charge. Not on my watch!"

35 run a tight ship

Means: to keep firm control of the way a business or organization is run, so that it is well organized and efficient.

"Robert, our CEO, is very organized and confident. He runs a tight ship and he does a great job."

36 back in business

37 business as usual

Both expressions mean the same thing.

Meaning: a situation in which things are working again as they should.

"The company is back in business after a long period of falling profits. Now, it's business as usual."

38 update me

39 keep me in the loop

40 keep me informed

All three have the same meaning.

Meaning: to keep someone informed or updated on recent developments regarding a specific subject or situation.

"Update me please. I hope you'll keep me in the loop on a regular basis."

"I want to be kept in the loop at every stage of development."

"Please keep me informed if you hear back from the Directors."

41 ASAP

Means: As Soon As Possible, each letter is spoken one by one, occasionally people say "Ay-Sap'.

"I want that report completed and delivered to me ASAP!"

"You'll be given the latest news ASAP, Tom."

42 it's not rocket science

When someone says that something is not rocket science, it means it's not difficult. In other words, it's easy to do or understand.

"You should be able to do this task. It's not rocket science."

Conclusion

In this article, I have introduced you to 42 useful expressions that are commonly used in business 'small talk'.

I hope you have found them useful.

*Remember, learn the meaning of each one, but don't try to memorise the sentences in which they are used.

*Know, instead, when to use them at the right time.

There are thousands of expressions, so it's impossible to list them all here.

Look out for Volume 2, in which I'll introduce you to another collection.

Further Reading

[Click here to learn how to remember this new vocabulary.](#)

[And to develop your English vocabulary, go here.](#)

