THOMAS SHANE is chairman of the board of Shane Co., Direct Diamond Importers, a business he founded in 1971 and which he has grown to 25 stores in 12 states. His business philosophy is customer-centered: offer the largest selection of high-quality jewelry at the lowest possible prices and give each customer an unconditional, money-back guarantee. He travels the world’s gem markets: to Antwerp and Tel Aviv for diamonds; to Bangkok, Bombay and Hong Kong for precious stones such as rubies and sapphires; and to Japan for pearls. Shane has BS and BA degrees in marketing from the University of Colorado. His awards include the Knight in the Order of Leopold II of the King of Belgium, and Alumnus of the Year from the University of Colorado.

The United States is not making the grade in the area of cultural sensitivity and may be losing its competitive edge in both education and business, said Tom Shane, basing his opinions on decades of transacting business with various cultures around the world. He is the third-generation operator of his family jewelry business which was established in 1929.

Shane differentiates his business from the competition by focusing on the stone. “That is our core competence.” With the exception of North America, these stones are found all over the world and Shane travels the continents to find the best quality and value for his customers. In the process, he works with people globally.

He described the diamond/precious stone trade as a “cottage industry. It’s not big business. It’s mostly familial, multigenerational home businesses. The relationships we are fortunate enough to develop are not government to government or institution to institution or impersonal employee in a Fortune 500 company to an impersonal employee in a similar sized company in a foreign land.

“The relationships are real people dealing with real people.”

This puts him in a unique position “to get into their minds and understand their thinking and understand their culture.” Most Americans are not so fortunate to have this experience, he said. “It didn’t take Thomas Friedman’s book for me to realize the world is flat. I grew up with that mentality even when there really were third world countries.”

As Shane’s exposure to diverse cultures and people increased over the years, he found that “the American perception of people from other cultures and their perception of us were quite different from reality. Misguided perceptions can lead to strained relations.”

US status eroded

Since World War II, the standing of the US in the world has been steadily decreasing. “It used to be that the US had a reputation for having the finest education in the world in many fields including business, medicine and others. There was a certain status associated with a degree from a US institution,” said Shane. “That status is still there to a certain extent” but it has been eroded due to what he believes is cultural insensitivity on the part of the US government and citizens.

He is concerned that United States citizens show an unwillingness to adapt to the new global environment. “Americans think that people drive on the right side of the road or the wrong side of the road. And we’re the only country that uses 110 current, a standard that makes it tough to sell our appliances in other parts of the world.”

Shane cited his experience as a retailer to illustrate how American and foreign travelers differ from one another. “At my store in Orlando, Florida, which attracts tourists from around the globe, I’ve never had a foreign customer ask how to convert dollars into yen or pounds or euros. They are armed with this information because, unlike American tourists, they do not expect to be accommodated as they would at home.”

The United States is at a competitive disadvantage for recruiting the best people from other countries.

Historically, the ability to attract good people from other parts of the world has been key to the vitality of the United States. However, the US immigration system, which has tightened considerably since 9/11, makes it hard for prospective faculty as well as students to gain entry. Although Shane appreciates the reason for this, “it puts the US at a competitive disadvantage for recruiting the best people.”

American businesses are also at a competitive disadvantage due to cultural insensitivities, Shane said. “We start with the assumption that the American way of doing business is the correct way. But the hoops that American companies have to jump through are in many cases offensive to the host country.” He referred to bribery and child labor which are acceptable in some cultures but illegal in the US and illegal for US companies operating abroad.

Shane made it clear that he was not advocating for bribery and child labor but merely pointing out that issues such as these have contributed to the cultural divide. On one side is the US, its customs and culture which many in this country feel are morally superior. On the other side are countries that have their own customs and cultures and want to maintain them.

“I would suggest that when we go into someone else’s home we should be respectful of their preferences and not tell them they must do things our way no matter how reprehensible we may view their practices.”

As a first step toward narrowing the divide, Shane recommended that “American students be taught the importance of having respect for other people even if they don’t understand them. Whether it’s manners or sensitivity to customs and cultures, students -- as well as the rest of us -- need to be aware of what is appropriate and what is proper when traveling or doing business in other parts of the globe.”

There is some hope. Shane noted that there is a growing awareness on US college campuses that something has to be done to improve the reputation of the United States in foreign countries.

“But culturally there’s a lot of work to be done before we see major changes.”

ON US COLLEGE CAMPUSES

THERE IS A GROWING AWARENESS THAT SOMETHING HAS TO BE DONE TO IMPROVE THE REPUTATION OF THE UNITED STATES ABROAD.

Keynote address

Greater sensitivity to other cultures needed