

A GUIDE FOR SHIPOWNERS ON NAVIGATING

FLAG ETIQUETTE

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CALLING AT FOREIGN PORTS AND ADHERING TO FLAG ETIQUETTE IS MORE THAN A FORMALITY – IT IS A BLEND OF **PROTOCOL, GOOD MANNERS, AND TRADITION.**

A CRUCIAL COMPONENT IS THE FLAG PROTOCOL, A SET OF RULES GOVERNING THE DISPLAY OF FLAGS WITHIN A COUNTRY.

TYPES OF FLAG

NATIONAL ENSIGN (often just Ensign)
The maritime flag of the ship's flag state.

COURTESY FLAG (or Courtesy Ensign)
The national maritime flag of the country being visited by a foreign ship.

HOUSE FLAG
The flag of the company that owns/operates the ship.

SIGNAL FLAG
Flags with special meanings in accordance with The International Code of Signals (INTERCO).

VARIED REGULATIONS AND SENSITIVITIES

Recent incidents have highlighted the consequences of neglecting flag etiquette. To navigate these nuances, shipowners should be aware of:

- The required dimensions of courtesy and ensign flags
- Hoisting flags on the correct mast or location on board ships
- The specific hours for flying courtesy flags whilst in another country's waters
- INTERCO for signal flags such as the quarantine flag (Q), dangerous cargo (B), pilot flag (G), or any other signal flags required by local regulations.

TO PREVENT FINES AND DELAYS, SHIPS MUST ADHERE TO FLAG ETIQUETTE WHEN HOISTING FLAGS IN FOREIGN PORTS OR WATERS.

\$15,000 FINE!

A ship recently incurred a fine in excess of USD 15,000 for flying a courtesy flag upside down.

In another case, a ship was fined an even larger sum for failing to display a courtesy flag whilst at anchor in a country's territorial waters.

BEST PRACTICES FOR SHIPOWNERS

To maintain a seamless sailing experience and avoid legal complications, shipowners should adopt the following best practices:

ACCURATE DISPLAY OF COURTESY FLAGS

- Follow the flag protocols of the country the ship is visiting
- Verify whether the merchant ensign or national flag is required as a courtesy flag
- When a voyage is confirmed, check that the required courtesy flags are present onboard and order as necessary.

FLAG DISPLAY

- Never fly a dirty or torn flag, especially with courtesy and ensign flags
- The smaller tack line side is generally on the upward side of the flag. The upward side can be marked with a narrow sign on the hoist side
- Various sources show the correct orientation of a country's courtesy flag, for example the publication 'Admiralty Mariners Handbook NP100'.

ADHERENCE TO REGULATIONS

Check the period for flying flags as per the country's requirements.

Observe local regulations on the location of courtesy flags.

VERIFICATION PROTOCOLS

- Have the officer of the watch (OOB) or another competent officer verify flag displays
- Consider supplying a simple diagram in the wheelhouse, showing which halyard should be used for each flag type
- Display signal flags required by local regulations.

INVENTORY AND UPKEEP

- Assign a deck officer to maintain an inventory of nautical and country flags
- Replace damaged or dirty flags
- Consider having spare courtesy flags for frequently visited countries
- For additional information on local laws and flag displays, consult the local agent, port control, or local P&I correspondent.