

SCI Annual Conference * St. Louis, Missouri
Demystifying Visa Issues
Friday, July 25, 2003 10:30am—12:00noon

Under U.S. law, all applicants for nonimmigrant visas are viewed as intending immigrants until they can convince the consular officer that they are not. International visitors applying for a visa must therefore be able to show that they have reasons for returning to their home country that are stronger than those for remaining in the United States.

Remember: The more supporting information the applicant can include the first time, the better his or her chances are of getting the visa. It is more difficult to get a second interview and even more difficult to get an appeal if the visa is denied.

Here are some things visa applicants can do to show that they have every intention of going home:

1. Purchase round-trip tickets
2. Obtain letters of support from:
 - a. local sister city program,
 - b. local elected official,
 - c. Sister Cities International,
 - d. supporting organization in visitor's home country, and/or
 - e. host family, stating that they will be responsible for applicant
3. Prove "ties" to the home country. Ties are the things that bind the applicant to his/her hometown, homeland, or current place of residence. Examples of ties include:
 - a. Employment (with documentation that applicant is expected to return to place of employment)
 - b. Financial statements (bank accounts, property ownership, investments)
 - c. Strong familial responsibility (as a parent, eldest son or caretaker)
 - d. Enrollment in school (if student) after planned return to home country
4. Be prepared to discuss how this visit to the U.S. will help with his or her long-term plans in the home country and be able to clearly articulate his or her plan to return home at the end of the program.
5. Provide agenda for the visit to the U.S. and the name and address of host family (if applicable)

Embassies and consulates will also be looking for some potential “red flags.” Examples of red flags are if the applicant:

- Is a young, unmarried woman
- Unemployed
- Has family already in the U.S.
- Has no family in home country
- Has previously been denied a visa
- Has any sort of connection with a radical group
- Is a male between the ages of 18-25 from a predominantly Islamic country
- Is coming from a country that is suffering severe economic difficulties

Other important things for the applicant to consider during the visa application and interview process:

- It should be clear at a glance to the consular officer what written documents the applicant is presenting and what they signify. Lengthy written explanations cannot be quickly read or evaluated. Remember that the applicant may only have 2-3 minutes of interview time, if they're lucky.
- **BE CONCISE.** Because of the volume of applications that are received, all consular officers are under considerable time pressure to conduct a quick and efficient interview. They must make a decision, for the most part, on the impressions they form during the first minute or two of the interview. Consequently, what the applicant says first and the initial impression he or she creates is critical to their success. The applicant should keep answers to the officer's questions short and to the point.
- Applicants should anticipate that the interview will be conducted in English and not in the native language. One suggestion is for the applicant to practice English conversation with a native speaker before the interview. If the applicant is coming to the United States solely to study intensive English, he or she should be prepared to explain how English would be useful for them in their home country.
- Applicants should not bring parents or family members with them to the interview. The consular officer wants to interview the applicant, not their family. A negative impression is created if the applicant is not prepared to speak on his or her own behalf. If the applicant is a minor applying for a high school program and need their parents there in case there are questions, for example, about funding, they should wait in the waiting room.
- Applicants should not engage the consular officer in an argument. If the applicant is denied a visa, ask the officer for a list of documents he or she would suggest the applicant bring in order to overcome the refusal, and try to get the reason for denial in writing.

Most importantly, applicants should check with the U.S. embassy or consulate in his or her home country for their specific requirements as to how to obtain a visa. <http://usembassy.state.gov/>