

Ten myths about multicultural customers

by [Michael D. Lee](#)

Minorities in America spend over \$2 trillion a year on products and services. People from diverse cultures are already one-third of the population and are the fastest-growing consumer group in the country. This is a huge market for retailers and service providers all across the country-- if you know how to meet the unique needs of customers and clients from the Hispanic, African American, Asian, Middle Eastern other cultures.

1. "People from other cultures only want to work with or buy from someone of their own culture."

Nothing could be further from the truth unless there is a language issue. Most of the people who complain about having trouble with multicultural customers are European American salespeople. They just need to understand how to meet the unique wants and needs of people from other cultures.

In fact, many cultural groups would **prefer** to work with a salesperson from outside their own culture. Asians, for example, are very private about their financial affairs and many are afraid that if they work with an Asian salesperson they might disclose their income, debts, and purchases, to others in their community.

2. "Multicultural people have superstitions and beliefs that are totally incomprehensible to Americans."

Remember that people in the United States have beliefs that often baffle outsiders such as the fact that black cats, walking under ladders, and the number thirteen are unlucky. Most other cultures have their own beliefs that are just different from ours.

Many cultural beliefs happen to directly affect the purchase of goods and services such as how items are packaged, colors that goods are wrapped in and how items are priced. For instance, many Asians believe that the number four is unlucky because when pronounced in Japanese or Chinese it sounds very similar to those cultures' word for "death". Items packaged in groups of four can symbolize bad luck for those people who believe in numerology. Notice, for instance, that if you buy a tea set it is usually packaged with five cups, not four, for this reason.

On the other hand, the number three can be bad luck for many Southeast Asians. You never want to package or even photograph them in groups of three since bad luck is believed to come to the person in the middle.

Just as there are very few hospitals or hotels with a thirteenth floor in America the same is true for buildings in Asia which usually lack a fourth floor. You can see that this belief is similar in both countries just the numbers are different.

3. "Some people from outside the U.S are unethical because they insist on renegotiating a purchase contract after it has been signed."

While it's true that people from other cultures often try to renegotiate a purchase contract after it has been signed it has nothing to do with ethics. America is a "low context" country where everything is spelled-out in detail between people either verbally or in a detailed, written contract. Other countries are "high context" where much more information is derived from the context of the communication and less is spelled out.

In high context countries it is understood that contracts only reflect the agreement between the parties at the **beginning** of a relationship which can change as they get to know each other. As a result, the parties are **obligated** to help each other "adjust" the contract to their needs until it is completed.

Keep this in mind when working with customers from high context countries such as Mexico, China, Japan, and the Middle East. You may wish to save something for the end of the transaction as things adjust. If you disclose your "bottom line price" too early it is sure to make things difficult during your relationship since you have nothing left to give.

4. "It's impossible to get personal financial information from multicultural people because they're so secretive."

This is one of those myths that is actually true. Many people who are new to this country are extremely private about their finances. Remember that they are unfamiliar with the banking and legal system in America and do not know whom to trust.

In addition, merely asking a question as innocent as "How much do you have for a down payment" on a large purchase can actually endanger the lives of your clients. Why is that? Many new immigrants do not believe in banks and keep much of their money hidden as cash in their homes.

Have you ever heard of "home invasion robberies" where the occupants are threatened until they reveal the whereabouts of their valuables? These kinds of crimes are commonly committed against Asians or Hispanics, not because they have nicer furniture or televisions than others, but because that's where the money is often hidden. The author personally knows of one Hispanic client who lost \$75,000 in cash to a Hispanic thief in a home robbery.

The easiest way to find out how much a new immigrant client has for a down payment is to give them a "menu" of choices. Show them the required investment and resulting monthly payments for ten percent down, twenty percent down, etc. The client may

also be interested in a "quick qualifier" or "no document" loan so be sure to explain the requirements for these as well. Usually, the loan that the client expresses the most interest in is the one they have the down payment for. Also, don't forget to remind your customer that they can also pay cash for their purchase. Many cultures believe it is a sin to owe others money and many do not believe in borrowing, even for very large purchases. The author has had customers show-up with as much \$750,000 in cash to buy homes!

5. "People from outside this country are unreasonable when it comes to negotiating."

Remember, there are two types of countries in the world - negotiating and non- negotiating. The United States is a non-negotiating country where we generally pay the price asked by vendors without question. In most other countries around the world, people haggle on everything from groceries to clothing to homes. To expect someone from one of these places not to bargain is tantamount to asking them not to breathe.

Experienced negotiators know that when they first make an offer on an item it is the lowest they will ever be able to go. They can only go in one direction from there-- up. This is why they may start embarrassingly low with their initial offer even if they might be willing to pay full price.

Many retailers and service providers in this country do not negotiate the price of their goods and services. In this case you can simply explain the situation this way, "We have sold all of our items (or services) to other buyers (or clients) for this price. To save face with them we must sell this one to you (or provide the same service) for the same price." People from other cultures can usually relate to the need to "save face" and will not ask another person to lose face with others.

Also, **veteran** hagglers are aware that they have the most bargaining power just before the transaction closes or the item is delivered. This is when they will usually ask for one extra concession to show their skill. Smart vendors will build an incentive into the deal so they can set something aside for this time otherwise it will likely come out of their own pockets. For instance, if a new car dealer is willing to throw in the floor mats it's best not to include it in the purchase regardless of the culture of the buyer. At delivery of the vehicle the concession can be thrown in to "sweeten the deal" as long as there is no more negotiating.

6. "People from other cultures are just too much trouble to bother with."

The author constantly hears this statement from retailers, service providers and their salespeople throughout the country. Too bad for them because if you know how to meet the special needs of multicultural customers they can be just as loyal and enjoyable to work with as anyone else. In addition, people from other cultures are very good about referring their friends and family if you serve them with sensitivity and patience.

An added bonus when working with people from outside the United States is the opportunity to learn about other cultures. Just think of it. When working with multicultural customers you can take a round-the- world trip without getting seasick or losing one piece of luggage!

7. "People should do as Americans do when they're in this country."

Did you ever wonder why we are called the "Ugly Americans" when we travel outside our borders? We will fly to Germany, France or China, and expect the people there to accommodate us in terms of providing the food and other amenities we are familiar with. We commonly expect to be served pizza in Asia and to speak English in France.

Just as it's difficult for us Americans to leave our 200-year-old culture at the gate when we travel abroad it's even harder for those coming here from cultures that are thousands of years old to do as we do here. While they do try to assimilate, it is hard for them.

Also, if we want a little piece of business from the fastest-growing segment of the retail market, it is **we** who will have to adjust - a little. Take the time to learn about other cultures, languages, and foods. As a bonus you will become a much more interesting person to talk to in the process.

8. "It would be too much trouble to customize my product or service to people from other cultures."

Actually, making your business attractive to people from other cultures is quite easy. First, start with your brochures. Print them in the major languages of the customers who frequent your store or office. Be sure to get help with the translation because many concepts and words in English do not convert easily to other languages. Also be sure to print in the correct language. For example, while Chinese, Korean, and Japanese, may appear similar to the untrained eye they are very different.

You may want to consider hiring someone who speaks the language of your major group of multicultural customers or clients. However, if they find you sensitive and patient with people who have language problems they will usually find a friend or family member to interpret. Excellent customer service is a **universal** language as is friendliness and a willingness to learn about other people's culture.

Next, hire a consultant to look at your store or office layout, packaging, and other information to make it more culturally friendly. Issues to consider include: "Feng Shui" (placement of objects for optimum energy flow); good and bad numerology (the number eight can be lucky for some groups while seven can be fortuitous for others); packaging (remember to avoid grouping three or

four of anything, depending on the groups you serve); some groups prefer that gifts be wrapped in bright colors while others favor more muted tones (get help from a consultant); and much more.

9. "We should treat everyone equally, regardless of culture."

Yes, it's true that we should treat every customer fairly but this does not necessarily mean equally. For instance, if a buyer who is blind comes into your store or office would you simply hand them a brochure to "read"? This is equal but is it fair? Hardly.

Wouldn't you try to treat them fairly?

Similarly, by taking into account the unique needs of every customer or client aren't we serving them better? This would be equally true for being culturally sensitive.

10. "People don't want to talk about their culture- they just want to be treated like everyone else."

This is probably the biggest myth when dealing with people from other cultures. We know we are different and unless something about culture is mentioned early in your relationship with a multicultural client it will always stand as a barrier to building true rapport.

Once you take a **sincere** interest in your customers' cultural background they are usually more than happy to tell you about their language, food, and even beliefs. Get into the habit of asking every customer, regardless of what they look like, "Where do your ancestors come from?" Notice, this can get the conversation started with someone from Ireland just as easily as Thailand.

Try asking customers how to say "hello" or even your name in their native tongue. You may be slightly embarrassed as you struggle with their language but they'll love you for it because now you know how they feel trying to speak English.

If you want to be truly successful with people from other cultures you must make this agreement with each and every one of them. "I will teach you about American customs and practices as it relates to my business. In exchange, I want you to teach me about your cultural background." In this way, you develop a mutually- beneficial relationship that will hopefully last a lifetime.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Michael D. Lee, MBA, helps companies connect to the \$2 trillion multicultural market. He is the author of several books on cultural marketing and speaks worldwide about the subject. Michael can be reached by e-mail at: Michael@EthnoConnect.com.