

## Ten Myths about Multicultural Customers

Over one-third of all Americans today are minorities and the numbers of people from diverse cultures are growing so rapidly that the U.S. Census Bureau expects this group to be half of the population by 2032. This is a huge market for retailers and business-to-business sellers across the country – if you know how to meet the unique needs of Hispanics, African Americans, Asians, Middle Easterners and others.

### 1. “PEOPLE FROM OTHER CULTURES ONLY WANT TO BUY FROM SOMEONE FROM THEIR OWN CULTURE.”

Nothing could be further from the truth unless there is a language barrier. Unfortunately, most salespeople will unintentionally insult a multicultural customer at least three times in the first thirty seconds. Ask yourself if you would buy from someone after being treated this way! You must make small adjustments in the way you meet and greet multicultural customers, to how you develop rapport and build a relationship if you want multicultural customers to buy from you!

### 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. Ask people about their beliefs and they'll be happy to tell you.

### 3. “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 as marked. In most other countries around the world, however, 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. In fact, if you expect haggling from someone who hails from a bargaining country you probably won't be disappointed.

### 4. “SOME PEOPLE FROM OUTSIDE THE U.S. ARE UNETHICAL BECAUSE THEY INSIST ON RENEGOTIATING A 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 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 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.

**5. "IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO GET 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 and those of their businesses. Remember that they are unfamiliar with the banking and legal system in America and do not know whom to trust. In fact, in their home country, banks may have a reputation for being a bad place to put money due to corruption, rampant inflation or both.

**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. This is 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.

**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 with cultures that are thousands of years old to do as we do here. While they do try to assimilate, it is hard for them to drop culturally ingrained practices overnight.

**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. 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.

**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 equally?

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. They know they 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, "Where do your ancestors come from?" Notice, this can get the conversation started with someone from Ireland just as easily as Thailand.

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 which will hopefully last a lifetime.



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