



Executive Marketing Report

Ten Big Ideas about Marketing to Koreans

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It is important to keep certain rules of thumb in mind when marketing to Koreans. While not every Korean will share the following outlooks completely, these ideas represent conventional social views in Korea and are applicable and useful for a wide range of marketing purposes.

This report focuses exclusively on people from and in South Korea, which is also known as the Republic of Korea. While many of these marketing insights may apply to North Koreans, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (also called North Korea) is inaccessible to outside marketing efforts and not relevant to this discussion.

Idea #1 - Koreans aspire to high achievement quickly.

Koreans credit much of their success to one thing: hard work. Even today, with

government-mandated shorter workweeks, many Korean “salarymen” still put in full days at the office on Saturdays and Sundays and wouldn’t know what it’s like to arrive home from work before 9pm during the week. Korean high school students wishing to get into the best universities are expected to study late into the night and on weekends.

This national obsession with success both leads to and derives from unusually heavy competition for the best spots in school and work. Koreans are frequently reminded about quasi-national goals to achieve ever higher rankings in international indices, such as GNP, Olympic medals, Nobel Prize winners and others. Koreans also crave personal perfection in terms of beauty and status, leading to a booming market for plastic surgery, cosmetics, luxury goods and others.

Another aspect of Korean achievement that gets a lot of attention, particularly with



expatriates living in Korea, is how fast things change and move in Korea, exemplified in the common Korean expression “balli, balli” (meaning, “fast, fast”). Considering how quickly the Korean economy and society have changed and how much further Koreans feel they still have to go to reach their goals, it’s not surprising that life moves quickly in Korea.

* *Additional Insights:* [What a Come-from-Behind Win Means to Koreans](#)

Marketing Takeaway: *Marketing messages to Koreans can take it for granted that the audience is working hard and trying to succeed. Telling Koreans to take it easy and enjoy a life of leisure may not communicate in ways expected in other societies since, even in rest, Koreans often take a remarkably hectic approach.*

Idea #2 - Koreans think their country is small.

Koreans often refer to their country’s diminutive size. This is somewhat true when considering land mass, but it is no longer the case from a population or GNP standpoint. Still, considering that throughout Korean history, the nation continuously struggled to get along with much larger powers (mainly China, Japan, Russia and the US) vying for influence in the region, it makes sense that Koreans would think they are a small fish in a big pond.

Korean TV shows play on this theme too, with seemingly every storyline containing an unlikely sequence of chance encounters between people in their daily lives. While real life is not quite like TV, residents of

Korea find themselves amazed at how often they see and meet people they know while out and about in the big city and how many Korean acquaintances know other Koreans that they know. This reinforces a “small world” perception in Korean society.

Marketing Takeaway: *Messages that might make Koreans feel they are at or could be at the mercy of outside influences (including companies and nations) should be avoided. On the other hand, Koreans will identify with serendipitous or coincidence-heavy scenarios.*

Idea #3 - Korea had a rough time entering the modern era but is now on a roll.

According to the Korean collective memory, the years 1900-1960 were a nightmare, a time of colonization by the Japanese, civil war and finally grinding poverty and political unrest and stagnation. This memory influences the social fears mentioned in Idea #2, and explains the Korean wariness toward Japan, even today, and Korean determination not to let the country become subservient to outsiders again like it was before.

On the other hand, Koreans are extremely proud of their achievements since the early 1960s and the success of the past fifty years informs Korean outlooks today in ways that can be inspiring.

Going back to the 19th century and before, Koreans treasure their long history and in the bustle of modern life still look for

answers to life's problems in the nostalgia of the distant past.

* *Additional Insights:* [“New” is the “New Old” in Korea Today](#)

Marketing Takeaway: *Be sensitive to Korean memories of the first half of the 20th century and to the influences of foreign powers during those years. Marketing that recognizes modern Korean success can be effective, as can finding and applying lessons from the traditional past.*

Idea #4 - Korean relationships are characterized by sharing.

Koreans maintain personal and business relationships through a constant process of give and take. In ways Westerners would consider extreme, Koreans find excuses to give gifts, including surprisingly large sums of money, in many different life situations.

While not always stated explicitly (and oftentimes the boundary here between legitimate business gift-giving and corruption is fuzzy), the purpose of these gifts is to pay back or create new obligations within relationships. Strong and ongoing Korean relationships never reach a state of equilibrium where each person's “account” is in balance.

The sharing of alcoholic drinks in social gatherings is also part of this dynamic, facilitating a range of personal connections and sharing.

* *Additional Insights:* [“Top 10 Gifts to Give in Korea to Make a Great Impression”](#)

Marketing Takeaway: *Marketing messages about gift-giving that are based on the idea that “it's the thought that counts” may not communicate to Koreans as intended since Korean gift-giving is typically tied to social obligations and agendas.*

Idea #5 - Koreans see themselves as racially uniform and unique.

Koreans believe they share one history going back 5,000+ years, and they don't see that history as overlapping with nearby countries, except when they were invaded or pressured by China or Japan.

There is only one dialect of the language in South Korea which is considered standard, and Koreans value sameness to the extent that the author's daughter was recently instructed by a teacher to dye her brown hair black so she'd look like every other child in the local Korean school.

Today, Korean society is rapidly diversifying (from a low base) due to immigration, primarily from other countries in Asia, and Koreans are very interested in these changes. But this trend has not gone far enough to alter basic perceptions, which also contribute to the Korean group-oriented social dynamic, and a very strong sense of patriotism.

On the other hand, Korean political views are diverse, and regional rivalries deeply influence the national political debate, in spite of the apparent “sameness”. Many Koreans also have disturbingly racist views of the world, perhaps due to a history of being on the receiving end of such prejudices for so long.

* *Additional Insights:* [Korean Cultural Nationalism: "Generation High Speed", the Vancouver Olympics, Japanese Imperialism and the March 1 Movement](#) and [Ethnic Nationalism in Korea](#), by Gi-Wook Shin

Marketing Takeaway: *Koreans are not anti-foreigner and are receptive to marketing messages brought to them by non-Koreans when presented in the right way. However, efforts to push the envelope for cultural diversity should be handled with care. In addition, Koreans respond strongly to fashions and fads due, in part, to their sense of group belonging, as well as other dynamics presented in this report. It is important to stay on top of social and business trends and to adapt quickly to changing demands by Korean consumers.*

6. Korean society is role and hierarchy based.

Koreans dress and behave for the role they are in at the time. Hill climbers always wear the same style of outfit and carry the same gear. Dress code in the office is predictably formal. Even the weather ladies on TV (they're all women!) dress in a raincoat for the camera if it's raining outside.

Furthermore, society is infused with a complex awareness of hierarchy, and this is reinforced by the Korean language which requires a speaker to subtly adjust every sentence to his or her position relative to the listener and that of those about whom are being spoken.

These role and hierarchical aspects of Korean society are said to be based on a Confucian outlook on life. Koreans are also uncommonly interested in the ages of

people, such that references to persons in the news generally include their age, even when age would seem to be irrelevant to the topic at hand.

* *Additional Insights:* [Succeed in Korean Business by Understanding Korean Company Hierarchy](#)

Marketing Takeaway: *Advertising which does not match the role and hierarchy expectations of a Korean audience will cause message dissonance which may influence effectiveness.*

7. Koreans all want to unify the country.

Koreans are painfully aware of the division of their country and while there are plenty of Koreans who are discouraged by the 60-year wait and who are going out of their way to sound realistic by talking about how expensive and difficult unification will be, once you get past that veneer, there's hardly anyone who wants to maintain the *status quo*. In spite of coffee shop talk, should the northern regime fall, the younger crowd will be even more enthusiastic than their elders about unification.

However, the North and South have mutually exclusive ideas about how this unification should take place, and even among South Koreans, there is a big disconnect between the political left and right on the issue.

Koreans tend to see the division of the country as a main factor preventing them from achieving their potential as a nation and generally feel that national division is someone else's fault (namely, the US and Russia).

* *Additional Insights:* [The New Chinese Province of Chosun](#)

Marketing Takeaway: *Korean unification is a sensitive subject for Koreans and particularly when discussed with foreigners. This topic should be avoided in marketing messages to Koreans, especially if coming from a perceived foreign perspective.*

8. Korean society is getting old fast.

Korea is undergoing dramatic demographic changes. The Korean birth rate is now one of the lowest in the world and the effects of this are starting to show. The author's son is in fifth grade at elementary school; the class entering first grade has barely half as many students as the fifth grade class, which has 20% fewer students than the class two grades ahead! This school is the norm, not the exception.

Korean transformation to an old-age society is underway and relentless, and while discussed a lot, is not necessary something Koreans are adequately prepared for yet.

* *Additional Insights:* [From Birthing Center to Nursing Home in Ansan](#)

Marketing Takeaway: *Over the next few decades, products and services to senior citizens will find a growing market and those for children and young people will struggle.*

9. Koreans dream of creating a new and better world.

Koreans are fascinated by the new. From the new cities that Koreans have been building around the country for the past 30 years or so, to Koreans' love of new technology, Koreans are looking to reshape their world. In fact, the author is aware of two recent projects by Korean organizations to build brand new cities in the northern wilds of Canada.

Today, as part of this desire to mold life to a better image, the Korean plastic surgery industry is a leader in Asia, and Koreans are at the forefront of efforts to clone animals and genetically engineer food. They are also proud of companies, such as Samsung, which are global leaders in high technology.

As a demographic imperative due to ageing of society, but also buttressed by a cultural affinity for technology, Koreans are already leading the way to acceptance of new technology-based solutions to social and individual challenges.

* *Additional Insights:* [Weighing the Pros and Cons of New City Development Along the West Sea](#)

Marketing Takeaway: *Koreans are receptive to marketing messages that emphasize the latest and snazziest devices and solutions, and those most likely to help a user achieve self-improvement and personal convenience.*

10. Ultimately, Koreans think they can't be understood by outsiders.

Koreans see their society as a black box that only they can open and see inside, and they aren't the only ones to think this. Even among foreigners, Korean society and business are known to be very tough for outsiders to penetrate.

This doesn't mean Koreans don't try to explain themselves. In fact, Korean culture is a focus of attention right now thanks to the Korean Wave, also called "Hallyu", throughout Asia and Koreans are working hard to fan this popularity. But efforts to share about the country and culture with others tend to be shallow attempts at communicating what they want others to know about them and no more.

In spite of a relationship with Korea that goes back almost twenty years, during which time the author has learned Korean at an advanced level and been married to a Korean for 15+ years, he's lost count of how many times he's been told, "Oh, you wouldn't understand. You're not Korean."

* *Additional Insights:* [I Sometimes Wonder if "Face" in Asia is a Figment of People's Imaginations](#)

Marketing Takeaway: *Koreans are not generally receptive to new perspectives about themselves that they perceive as coming from outsiders and marketing efforts to Koreans must be mindful of this. It goes without saying that a Korean reading this paper would have mixed feelings about the ideas shared here, not least because they weren't written by a Korean.*

Transferring These Lessons to Japan and China

While Korea, Japan and the Chinese-language region (China, Taiwan and Hong Kong) are separate countries and cultures with individual characteristics, there are still a striking number of ways in which, to the eyes of a Westerner, they are similar. In general, the cultures of Korea and Japan are more similar to each other than they are to the Chinese region, but of course, in terms of those perceptions which originate from historical events and where each country played a different role, the outlooks in Korea will be much different than those of Japan and China. Marketing approaches must be wisely tailored to each country.

About the Author

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