



Executive Report

Top 10 Gifts to Give in Korea to Make a Great Impression

Korean society is all about giving and receiving gifts. While Westerners are not expected to know what to give and when, this can really work in your favor if you're ready with the right gift at the right moment.

1. Souvenir from Home

Small souvenirs from home show great consideration to your Korean hosts for a business meeting or when getting together with friends. In most cases, these gifts don't have to be expensive (but they shouldn't be obviously cheap either).

While the value limits that Korean companies put on gifts their employees are allowed to accept is generally higher than those allowed by Western companies, you should not choose very expensive gifts unless your gift is explicitly for the company as a whole. There is a delicate balance to maintain here. While the value of the gift may in fact need to rise in proportion to the value of the business you are intending to do with your Korean counterparts, you certainly don't want to go overboard and give the impression that you are trying to bribe your way into a deal.

Example souvenirs would be anything that the recipient can enjoy and which will remind them of you, such as a small replica of the Alamo if you're from San Antonio, an Elvis memento if you call Memphis home, or a Disney toy for your counterpart's children if you live anywhere in central Florida.

When a company group from the US is visiting a Korean company, I often recommend that they take a nicely framed photograph of their city's skyline with a small metal plate engraved with the company name on the bottom. But photographs or paintings of typical scenes from the area can make great gifts that your hosts will hang on the wall to remember you for years.

2. Liquor

Never leave the airport without picking up some duty-free alcohol. Spend in accordance with the level of importance of the person you are visiting. A good bottle of whisky



makes a great gift. You can never go wrong with a gift of high quality liquor: the few Korean businesspeople who don't drink won't be offended since they can still display it on a shelf or re-gift it for someone who does drink, and those who do drink will appreciate it very much for themselves.

3. Invitation for Dinner

If on business in Korea, it is unlikely that your hosts will let you pay for a meal. But your effort to try to pay will certainly be appreciated. Even if you ring up an old Korean acquaintance who you'd like to meet again, it would be tacky to get together without offering an invitation to lunch or dinner. Keep in mind that you'll have to fight hard to pay so if you intend to do so, you should make sure that you beat your friend or business counterpart to the cash register and have your cash ready in hand.

Also, if something great happens in your life, such as a job promotion or winning the lottery, your Korean counterparts are likely to ask you to buy them dinner. You can insist on the same when they have something good happen to them, too!

4. Household Goods

You must never arrive at a Korean's home without a gift.

It can be most anything, and a souvenir or liquor will suffice. But if you don't have either on hand, it is also accepted practice to stop by the supermarket or convenience store on the way to pick up household products (Toilet paper is a particularly popular gift for housewarming parties in

Korea!), juice or fruit. Budgeting at least \$10-15 for household gifts is appropriate.

If your hosts have picked you up and are bringing you to their place, you should have prepared these gifts in advance. If you forgot, make it a point to ask your host to stop the car so you can get something. He/she will tell you that a gift isn't necessary but ignore this nonsense. Insist on stopping to get something and explain that you'd never want to show up at their house empty-handed. He/she will relent eventually and your gift will be greatly appreciated.

5. Money

Money is the standard gift at weddings or funerals and one-year birthdays of babies. It is always inserted into a white envelope in advance. Also, in the case of weddings, you should put your name on the front of the envelope.

Expect to break the bank a bit here since, if you've been invited, you've already been proven a "close friend". About \$100 would be average. You might get away with \$70 or so, but don't give less. And always give in multiples of W10,000.

It would really look tacky to give an odd amount of, say, W103,600 and any amount with the number "4" in it is considered bad luck.

Also, if visiting a Korean friend's home for the Lunar New Year, you should take some extra money too as the children will line up to bow to you and will expect cash in return. You can get away with \$5 or so for small children, but the bigger kids will want more (\$20 and up...).



If you're confused about how much to give, don't worry! As a foreigner, you would never be expected to know these customs by heart, and it is acceptable to ask a local friend for guidance.

6. Gift Basket

The standard gift to give a family you are visiting during the major Korean holidays of Seol-nal (Lunar New Year) and Chuseok is a commercially prepared gift basket.

On these days, the shops will display them out front. If you're walking any distance at all to get to your host's home, you'll have no problem finding a place that sells them. Inside these gift baskets are collections of household goods, non-perishable foods, fruits or other goodies. Expect to spend a bit for a nice gift.

7. Invitation to Visit

This is an excellent "gift" to give after your hosts in Asia have shown a great deal of hospitality to you. It is unlikely that the invitee will take you up on the offer and extending invitations that aren't intended to be claimed is a common practice of etiquette amongst Koreans too, but you should be ready in case someone does call you up from the Korea saying they are on their way.

Hosting them in your home won't be expected (though your guests may appreciate the opportunity to experience "real life" in your country by staying at your home) and should such a situation arise, you can be very clear on your desire to help arrange accommodation at a nearby hotel. If

Koreans do visit, you should be prepared to pick up the tab on most everything you do together which is to reciprocate for them paying for everything when you visited them. You would not generally be expected to pay for their hotel or activities they did when you weren't around.

8. Gift Certificate

A gift certificate to a local department store makes a great birthday or friendship gift to someone with whom you have an ongoing relationship. If buying for a Korean friend in the US, you'll look cheap if you spent something like \$10-20. A \$50 gift certificate will be appreciated much more than a \$10 gift certificate.

Also, because appearances do matter in Korea, a \$50 gift certificate to Dillard's or Macy's makes a better gift for a Korean than a \$50 one to Wal-Mart. Also, if for a Korean friend in the US, unless you are sure they like American food, you may want to steer clear of restaurant gift certificates.

9. Stickers/\$2 Bills

All kids LOVE stickers. And stickers from overseas that they can't get back home will bring a ton of enjoyment to the young children of your business associates and friends overseas. You can never go wrong giving a couple sheets of stickers that you brought from home to a child in Korea.

Looking for a less expensive way to please older kids? This is a neat little tip that entails a special trip to your bank at home, but it ensures that your gift-giving stays affordable. Older kids are tickled to get a



\$2 bill from you, especially when you tell them that some people say it brings good luck. They might even frame it and put it on their wall! In fact, we've had tremendous "success" giving \$2 bills. Recipients come back asking for more.

Cheap trinkets from your destination will be appreciated very much and you really don't need to bring back much. I recall a boss of mine at in Korea who returned from China with "gifts" for the team that I doubt cost him more than \$10 for everything. That was tacky though and you should do better than this.

10. Souvenir from Place Visited

If you work at a Korean company and you take a business trip anywhere, you'd be remiss to come back with your hands empty.

Bonus Gift Ideas

Novelty Gift #1 – UNDERWEAR

When the son or daughter of a friend gets a new job and receives his/her first paycheck, it is common practice to give underwear to the parents! If this seems a bit odd, a set of pajamas would also be fine.

Novelty Gift #2 – SOCKS

Socks are considered a respectable gift for many occasions. I've never quite figured out why, but if you give socks, you'll get a laugh and the recipient may compliment you on your cultural insight!

Novelty Gift #3 – TAFFY

Give taffy to a student on the day of his/her test. The stickiness of the candy is supposed to help with answer retention (think answers sticking to one's brain).

Novelty Gift #4 – BABY SHOES

If you're a woman and a female friend of yours gets pregnant, you should buy her some baby shoes as soon as you hear the news. You don't have to wait until the baby is due. (When the baby is born, another gift of baby products would also be appropriate.)

To Wrap or Not to Wrap

It would generally not be necessary to wrap a gift that you have put special thought into and picked out from home. However, when giving less personal gifts such as a bottle of liquor, you should wrap it. This helps to give a sense of thoughtfulness to an otherwise ordinary gift item.

No matter where you purchase your gift (department store, convenience store, airplane), you can ask for gift-wrapping. In some cases, gifts will already have been pre-packaged and made ready for giving.

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About Steven S. Bammel

A graduate of the University of Texas at Arlington (College of Business Administration), Steven S. Bammel worked in Seoul for nearly five years as an employee of the LG Group of South Korea. During that time, he promoted international business for several Korean companies and edited/translated hundreds of documents. He also learned about Korean business practices from the inside.



For several years, Steven, his wife Myunghee and two children Treasure and Cauvery, shared their time between Irving, Texas and the company's corporate quarters near Seoul, Korea but have recently returned to Korea while Steven studies at the Graduate School of Business Administration at Hanyang University and further develops his unique Korean business perspective.

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