

Singapore: Cultural Tips

Punctuality is important for all business appointments. It is considered an insult to leave a Singaporean business executive waiting.

Appointments should be scheduled at least one week in advance.

Office hours are normally between 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Some offices, however, practice flexible hours, allowing workers to arrive any time between 7:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.

Some offices will run for a half-day on Saturdays, typically in the morning.

Lunch period is usually between 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m or 1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. In some offices, staff take turns going for lunch.

Friday is the Muslim's holy day and those who work on Fridays will take a two-hour break during lunch.

Turning up for Appointments

Most Singaporeans arrive at social events on time or slightly late. According to certain customary beliefs, a visitor who arrives on time for a meal gives the impression of being greedy.

Although you should make the effort to be on time, once in a while a Singaporean may prefer to arrive a few minutes late so as not to appear overly eager or anxious, especially if the person has been invited to an event at which food will be served.

Guests may arrive a few minutes early to a social occasion only when a close friendship has been established. If you are hosting a social event and your guests are close friends, make the effort to be ready early.

On rainy days, call for a taxi instead of waiting at a taxi stand or hailing it from the road. Otherwise, you might end up waiting for hours and missing your appointments.

If, for whatever reason, you can't make it for your appointment, please remember to call [preferably personally] to postpone the time or the date.

Singapore is incredibly hot and humid all year long, with a temperature range of 75F to 88F [24C to 31 C], and humidity above 90%. Because of this heat and humidity, business dress in Singapore is often casual.

Standard office wear [men]: dark trousers, light-colour long-sleeved shirts and ties. Jackets are not required.

When it is very hot and humid, a light-colour long-sleeved shirt [without a tie] and trousers are usually preferred.

Short-sleeved shirts are acceptable too but not in every organization.

Standard office wear [women]: blouse with pants or skirt. Hosiery and business suits [pants suits or skirt suits] are only required in more formal offices.

Only some companies allow women to wear sleeveless blouses. If you want to wear a sleeveless blouse, please make sure you shave your armpits because Singaporeans deem unshaved armpits [for women] to be lacking in etiquette.

Though Singapore is a liberal country, people might form a negative impression of women who wear clothes which are too revealing.

For ladies, light makeup is preferred because of the hot and humid weather. Accessories, such as a scarf, necklace, brooch, watch and ring should not be too 'excessive.'

Some Muslim women wear blouses that cover at least their upper arms and skirts that are at knee length or longer. They also wear religious headgear.

As a foreigner, you should dress 'up' until you are certain of the degree of formality required. The safest option is to wear a suit and remove the jacket when it is appropriate.

For some companies which operate during the weekends, jeans, polo tees and track shoes/moccasins are acceptable, but shorts/Bermudas, round-neck tees and slippers are a no-no.

Regardless of what you choose to wear, keeping a clean and dry appearance is important because you will tend to sweat a lot in this weather. To avoid the embarrassment of having two wet blotches under your armpits, use anti-perspirant.

If you do not know the other party well or if this is the first meeting, follow the conversational leads that have already been established.

It's acceptable to ask general work-related questions but you should refrain from personal questions, such as age and income.

If you do not wish to answer any personal question, side-step these questions as graciously as possible. Do not express outrage or similar feelings that will cause the other person to 'lose face.'

Pay compliments based on the other party's accomplishments and appearance.

Singaporeans love food and this will be a topic that will be responded to in a relaxed and casual way.

Welcome Topics of Conversation

Travel

Plans for the future

Arts

Accomplishments of the individual or success of the company

Economic advancement in Singapore

Discussing the variety of food available in Singapore or praising Singaporean cuisine

Topics to Avoid

Though Singapore is a harmonious, multi-racial, society, it is still recommended that you avoid racial and religious topics.

It is 'dangerous' to discuss the strained part of the relationship between Malaysia and Singapore [e.g. the water issue] because the person you are talking to might probably be a Malaysian who is now a Singaporean PR.

Politics [especially during the election period]

Criticizing any aspect of Singapore

Gossiping about another individual's personal life should be avoided. Even if the other party initiates the topic, try to sidetrack from it skilfully.

There are many races in Singapore and thus the naming patterns can be quite diverse and confusing. It is best to ask a Singaporean what you should call him or her. For example, a Malay woman named Suhaila might like you to call her Su.

Besides their Chinese name, many Chinese have their so-called 'Christian name' or 'English name', such as 'Jessica', 'Sharon' or 'Wendy.' For Westerners who find it hard to remember Chinese names, they can address them by their 'Christian names.'

Westerners might find it hard to remember and pronounce Indian and Malay names. Try to ask them to spell their names out so you can remember and pronounce them better.

Singaporeans may be unsure as to which is your last name. Specify the name that you would like to be called; if they know your last name, they would most likely address you by your last name, together with a title, till you ask them to dispense with the formality.

If you are addressing someone more junior than you are [in terms of rank in the company], it is acceptable to address that person by the first name. In fact, this will make him or her more comfortable. If you are addressing someone more senior than you are [in terms of rank in the company], be sure to address the person with a title and last name.

If someone has a professional title, such as 'President', 'Doctor' or 'Professor', address him or her accordingly.

You might hear someone calling an older woman 'auntie' or an older man 'uncle.' This is an informal form of addressing someone who is middle-aged or older. However, you have to be careful when using this form of address. Calling a woman 'auntie' might offend her if she doesn't think she is old enough to be called that. However, if you are ordering food at a food stall and a middle-aged woman is serving you, you can address her as 'auntie.' She might even find it amusing to hear it from a Westerner!

Chinese Naming Patterns

Chinese names are usually composed of a surname followed by one or two first names, such as 'Chen [surname] Li Mei [first names]' or 'Lim [surname] An [first name].'

All Chinese belong to a dialect group, such as Hokkein, Cantonese, Hainanese, Teochews or Hakka. Therefore, besides their Chinese name, they have another dialect name. For example, Chen Mei Ling, a Chinese woman who belongs to the Cantonese dialect group, will have her dialect name as 'Chan Mui Leng.'

Men should simply be addressed with a courtesy or professional title plus a surname [i.e. 'Mr. Ping' or 'Dr. Ping'].

There are also some young married women who prefer to be still addressed by the title 'Ms.'

Some married Chinese women use their husband's name but some still keep their maiden name. Ms. Chen Mei Ling who married Mr. Ping Jia Bao can either be addressed as Mrs. Ping or Mdm. Chen. However, for the younger generation, the women still prefer to be addressed as 'Ms.'

It is a norm that many Chinese have a 'Christian name' or 'English name.' For example, Ms. Chen Mei Ling [Chinese name] / Ms. Chan Mui Leng [dialect name] can also be called Ms. Daisy Chen ['English name'].

Malay Naming Patterns

Malays do not have family names. They are known by a given name plus 'bin' [son of] or 'binte' [daughter of] followed by their father's name. For example, the son and daughter of Jamal are named 'Karim bin Jamal' and 'Fatimah binte Jamal' respectively. When Karim has his own son, the latter will be named 'Ahmad bin Karim.'

Some Westernized Malays drop the 'bin' or 'binte' from their names and some even take up an 'English name' like the Chinese.

Indian Naming Patterns

Indians in Singapore may follow several different traditions in terms of naming. While they did not traditionally have surnames, some have now adopted a family name that all members of their family use, generation after generation.

Traditional Indians have no family surname. They are known by a given name plus 'S/O' [son of] or 'D/O' [daughter of] followed by their father's name. For example, the son and daughter of Kumar are named 'Ankur S/O Kumar' and 'Sundari S/O Kumar' respectively. When Ankur has his own son, the latter will be named 'Anil S/O Ankur'.

When an Indian woman marries, she usually ceases to use her father's name. Instead, she follows her personal name with her husband's name.

Singapore prides itself on being the most corruption-free state in Asia. Consequently, it has strict laws against bribery. Government employees may not accept gifts of any kind, especially money.

A large gift should be presented to the entire group. When giving small gifts, they should be given to everyone present.

You can offer a present as a welcome gift or a thank you gift but it should not be an overly expensive item.

Some suitable gifts: chocolates, a souvenir from your country, a corporate gift with your company logo, brand name gifts [which don't have to be too expensive].

To be polite, people will usually refuse a gift before accepting it. They believe that this will prevent them from appearing greedy. You can continue to insist that they accept the gift and, upon acceptance, say that you are pleased that he or she has done so.

Unwrapping a gift in front of the giver is not a part of Singaporean culture. This action implies that the recipient is greedy and impatient. Moreover, if the gift turns out to be a poor choice, it will result in awkwardness. Instead, the recipient will briefly say 'thank-you', set aside the gift, and then open it only after your departure.

Giving Gifts to the Chinese

Avoid bringing gifts of food with you to a Chinese dinner or gathering unless it has been agreed upon beforehand. To bring food may imply that the hospitality is inadequate--a terrible insult to a Singaporean host.

At Chinese New Year, it is customary to present a gift of money in a red envelope to children and to the non-governmental service personnel you deal with on a regular basis. The gift is called a 'hong bao.' Ensure that you give only new bills in even numbers and even amounts.

Instead of 'hong bao', it is also common to give mandarin oranges or hampers. For mandarin oranges, they have to come in even numbers, usually 2 or 4. You will give the oranges upon arrival at the host's house and when you are about to leave, the host will give you the same number of oranges in return.

The number '8' is a lucky number which means 'get rich' and the number '4' is an unlucky number which means 'die.' Therefore, when choosing a gift that has to do with numbers, try to go for '8' and avoid '4.'

Do not give clocks as presents because 'giving clocks' in Chinese is 'song zhong', which means 'arrange for the burial of deceased parents or an elder.' Other items that are associated with funerals are: straw sandals, white candles and joss sticks.

Giving Gifts to a Malay

Malays accept gifts with pleasure and will often reciprocate.

If you are invited to a Malay home, try to bring small, practical gifts for the family, such as flowers, candies or toys for the children.

Malays prefer the colour green, so you might like to wrap your present in green. During Hari Raya Puasa [a Muslim celebration to mark the end of the month-long fast during the Ramadan], the Muslim Malays will give out green envelopes that contain money.

It is appropriate to bring food to a Malay dinner or gathering but it must be 'halal' [Malay equivalent of 'kosher'] and there should be no pork items.

Avoid giving these items to an observant Muslim: alcohol, perfumes containing alcohol, pork, pigskin products, personal items such as underwear, toy dogs or gifts with pictures of dogs, images of nude or partially clad women [even in paintings or sculptures with artistic merit].

Giving Gifts to an Indian

Indians love bright colours as they signify happiness. Therefore, you might like to wrap your gifts in bright red, yellow or green colours.

Should you give money to an Indian, make sure that it is in odd numbers. For example, give \$11 instead of \$10. Odd numbers are preferred since they are believed to be luckier.

Avoid giving frangipanis [a kind of flower popularly used by Hawaiians to make leis] as flower gifts, such as in a hamper or bouquet. Indians use this flower only for funeral wreaths.

Do not present Hindu Indians with gifts of food, including beef.

Hindu Indians do not use cattle products. Leather products of any kind should not be presented as a gift.

Business cards should be printed in English. English is considered as a first language in Singapore and people usually communicate in this language in business.

After self-introduction, business cards should be exchanged with every business associate present. Bring a plentiful supply of cards with you, since Singaporean businesspeople tend to be enthusiastic about exchanging them.

With both hands holding your card, present it to the recipient with the print facing him or her.

When you receive the other party's card, accept it with both hands, then study it for a few moments before carefully placing it into your business card holder, pocket, or on the table.

Do not hastily stuff a business card into your back pocket as it will appear rude. By the same token, do not write on someone's business card.

After examining a card, address the person by his name or title [if he/she is of seniority in terms of age or rank]. This will help you remember his/her name and build rapport quickly.

Singaporean businesspeople tend to allow their feelings to guide their decision-making and problem solving. Nationalism also tends to be a strong influence in thinking.

The group, rather than the individual, prevails in Singaporean business culture. Moreover, the individual identity is subsumed into the group. The oldest or most competent member usually assumes the leadership position.

Forming a relationship with each group member is essential to conducting business in Singapore. Your Singaporean counterparts must genuinely like and feel at ease with you.

You will probably be required to take several trips over a period of months before negotiations conclude.

In Singaporean business culture, the personal relationship you build is often considered more important than the company you represent.

If your company replaces you with another representative, your substitute will have to rebuild the personal relationship you have established.

Singaporean business culture is very ethnocentric: there tends to be an inherent trust among people of the same ethnic group.

Singaporean business culture is intensely competitive and has an exceptionally strong work ethic.

Be aware that Singapore is a meritocracy. Whether employed by business or the government, employees will rarely advance without committing themselves to long hours and intensely hard work. Executives usually work much longer days than their subordinates.

Professional competence, merit, and the ability to work within a team are heavily emphasized.

You'll find that business negotiations in Singapore are conducted at a much slower pace than in the United States.

Age and seniority are revered in this culture. If you are part of a delegation, ensure that the most important members are introduced first. If you are introducing two people, state the name of the most important individual first.

Stand when family members more than one generation older than you make an entrance. Also, follow this courtesy when your manager or someone higher in rank than you enters a room.

When sitting in a chair, keep your feet flat on the floor, rather than crossing your legs in front of elders or hierarchical superiors.

Always speak in quiet and gentle tones. Moreover, remain calm.

'Losing face', that is, being embarrassed or losing control of one's emotions in public, has negative consequences in Singaporean society.

'Losing face' includes expressing anger in public; anyone who makes such displays is judged as unworthy of respect and trust.

Keep your cool and refrain from showing that you are upset. By remaining calm at all times, you will be perceived as being able to control your emotions, rather than allowing them to control you.

Avoid publicly debating, correcting, or disagreeing with an older person or superior. The older person or superior will only 'lose face', and, consequently, you will lose the respect of others. This rule should also be followed when you are with your boss and are meeting with Singaporeans.

Outbursts of laughter are not always indicative of mirth in this culture. More often, laughter is used to mask 'loss of face', nervousness, shyness, or disapproval.

Singaporeans will rarely answer a question with a blunt 'no.' Be aware that a 'yes' that sounds hesitant or weak usually means 'no.'

Tentative answers such as 'Yes, but...', 'This may not work out...', and 'My schedule may not allow me...' may also be indications of a 'no' answer.

If you can tell that the respondent is deliberately ignoring your question, this is often another way of indicating a 'no' answer.

Sucking in air through the teeth is one way to signal a definite answer of 'no.' In Singaporean business culture, this sound is used to indicate that there is a serious problem, even if on the surface, what is being said sounds positive.

An answer of 'perhaps' may indicate a 'yes.' If your counterpart agrees to your proposal and offers assistance to you, this may also be interpreted as a 'yes.'

Politeness is a necessary element in a successful business relationship with Singaporeans. Politeness will not, however, affect their determination to reach their objectives.

Avoid making facial expressions that suggest disagreement [i.e. grimacing at something you may disagree with or shaking your head to indicate 'no'].

In Singapore, if you don't want to answer any personal question, you can smile and politely reply that these subjects are not discussed in your culture.

It is considered polite among Singaporean Chinese to offer both the positive and negative possibilities in practically every question that requires a decision. For example, rather than asking, 'Would you like to go to the theatre?' they are likely to ask, 'Do you want to go to the theatre or not?'

Singapore has its own brand of English known as 'Singlish.' Singlish differs from English in terms of sentence structure, grammar as well as the frequent 'empty words' such as 'lah', 'leh', 'hor' and 'meh.' However, not all Singaporeans speak Singlish. Many of them do speak perfect English.

Together with the weird language usage, Singaporeans might have a strong accent because all of them speak a second language. If this is the first time you are talking to Singaporeans, you might not understand fully what they are talking about. Be patient and you will get used to it after a while. If you do not understand, you can politely ask him or her to repeat.

Try to accept social invitations of any kind. These occasions are important parts of doing business in Singapore.

Follow Singaporean business etiquette and respond to invitations you receive in writing. If you cannot attend, at least send a representative from your company.

Generally, spouses may be invited to dinners but not to lunch. Business will not, however, be discussed on any occasion when spouses are present.

The anticorruption laws in Singapore are exceptionally strict. Consequently, government officials often cannot participate in social events.

Social occasions tend to revolve around food.

When you are making arrangements for a meal, be aware of the food that may be considered taboo by your Singaporean clients. In most situations you will be able to determine which food is restricted based on the person's religion. For example, a devout Muslim counterpart will not partake of alcohol or pork, whereas your Buddhist counterpart will not eat beef.

It is alright to ask if someone has any dietary requirement, especially if you are arranging for a full day training course or dinner.

Singapore has a strong 'coffee culture.' Therefore, instead of inviting you for meals, your client might invite you for coffee at Starbucks or Coffee Beans.

Depending on the clients you are dealing with, some might offer to bring you to 'nightclubs' or 'karaoke.' These nightclubs and karaoke can be sleazy and you will find there female escorts who attempt to make you consume great amounts of alcohol.

Singapore is rich in night life. Therefore, some dinner invitations can start as early as 7 p.m. and move on to night entertainment and end as late as after midnight.

Many businessmen in Singapore like to play golf. There are many golf clubs and country clubs in Singapore. Your business counterpart might even invite you for a golf session or a short 2-day trip to a golf club in the southern part of Malaysia or even to one of the islands.

? Singapore is a food paradise and you can get all sorts of food, ranging from South Indian cuisine to Mediterranean food and Mongolian BBQ. Therefore, be prepared for all kinds of diverse cultural customs, e.g. you might need to remove your shoes in a Japanese restaurant if you dine in their VIP room.

Juices, soft drinks, water, alcohol and beer are popular beverages that may be served with a meal. Keep in mind that in Singapore, all beverages are usually served cold or with ice.

At a more formal Chinese dinner, one custom is for your host to raise his or her own glass and say 'please' or 'ch'ing.'

When dining in a Chinese restaurant, you will also be presented with several bowls that are to be used for rice, soup, bones, and sauces. A napkin will also be available.

If you have something in your mouth that you would like to remove, use your chopsticks instead of your hands. The unwanted food item should be placed either on the small plate that was provided for this circumstance or on the tablecloth if a plate is unavailable.

When drinking soup, you should use the spoon that was provided. It is considered bad manners to drink soup straight from the bowl or to make slurping sounds.

One taboo in using chopsticks is sticking them into the rice bowl. This is because in ritual offerings to the dead, some Chinese will stick chopsticks vertically into the rice bowl. Therefore, when you do this at a dinner table, it might look like you are offering food to the 'dead' [who is your client sitting opposite you].

Someone might use his cutlery to take food and put it on your plate. This is a gesture of hospitality. However, you might want to refrain from reciprocating the same gesture as you might pick something that the other person does not eat. The other party might not openly express it and some will even 'swallow' it out of politeness.

Indian utensil etiquette requires that the serving spoon should not touch the plate when either you or another person is putting food on a plate.

When you are serving yourself, you should make a point of taking only the portion of food nearest to you. In addition, do not stir the food as if you are searching for something.

Singaporeans will notice if you are not eating a particular dish and they will ask you for the reason. If you don't want to appear picky, a good excuse is health reasons.

If you like the food [or even if you don't like the food], pay compliments to the host for making an excellent choice.

Speak in low and subtle tones. Do not shout.

Keep eye contact with the other party. Avoiding or having too much eye contact are both deemed as rude.

Public contact, to a certain degree, is acceptable. For example, it is a common sight to see couples hugging and holding hands.

Physical contact between people of the same sex is not as prevalent. Women might hold hands or lock arms when walking on the streets, but physical contact between men is rarer. However, you might spot some Indians holding hands in Little India. They are usually foreign workers and their actions are interpreted strictly as a gesture of friendship.

The spatial distance between two individuals varies, depending on the gender and culture. Generally, you should stand at one-arm's length.

Never pat a Chinese person on the head or shoulders. Some of them are superstitious and they believe that when you do it, you are putting out their 'fire', which protects them or gives them good luck.

For religious reasons, avoid physical contact with Muslims. Most Muslim women and some Muslim men do not like to have physical contact with another person. [Please note that the word 'Muslim' does not apply only to the Malays. Some Chinese, Indians and other races are Muslims and, by the same token, some Malays are non-Muslims.]

Do not invite Muslims for alcohol or food with pork.

You might see someone eating with his or her hands. This is common, especially among the Indians and Malays.

Feet are believed to be unclean. Therefore, never move, kick or touch anything with your feet.

It is considered rude to point at anyone with the forefinger or middle finger. People prefer to use an open palm or their thumb [with your hand closed].

Pounding one fist into the palm of the other hand is another gesture to avoid as many people perceive it to be obscene.

To beckon someone, hold your hand out with the palm down and make a scooping motion with the fingers. Never beckon someone with your palm up and wagging your fingers.

Among Indians, turning the head from side to side actually signals agreement though Westerners interpret this as a 'no' signal.

The 'arms akimbo' position--standing tall with your hands on your hips--is typically perceived as an angry and aggressive posture.

Do not spit or throw rubbish on the floor. Even if the police do not nab you, the people around you will throw you an offended glance.

Some public restrooms use toilet bowls while others still have the 'squat' style cubicles. Be sure to carry a pack of tissues with you. It will come in handy if you enter a public restroom without toilet paper. If there is a restroom attendant, it is not necessary for you to give tips, unless you see that he or she has a coin bowl for collecting tips.

In a restaurant, do not give tips openly or put them on the table before you leave. To give tips, tell the waiter to keep the change when you are settling the bill.

Smoking is prohibited in many areas, especially air-conditioned venues.

If you are taking a course or attending a seminar, always be punctual and switch your cell phone to silent mode. These courtesies apply to any public gathering, such as at a movie theatre or a dinner appointment.

Singaporeans queue up for everything, even for food at a food stall in the hawker centre [a sheltered place where there are many stalls selling food]. People will be offended if you jump queue.

To get a taxi, you can either join the queue at the taxi stand or hail one from the road. Normally, taxi drivers are not allowed to reject any passenger but if they do, please do not take it personally. The taxi driver may already have an on-call job or he may be changing shift. In these situations, there will usually be a sign on the taxi to indicate 'Change Shift' or 'On-Call.'

There are a few taxi companies, which offer on-call service at an extra charge of about S\$3.20 per trip. Usually at knock-off time, weekends or rainy days, it is nearly impossible to get a taxi just by waiting at the taxi stand or hailing one off the road.

Many Singaporeans are considerate. If a pregnant lady, a child, a handicapped or an elderly person gets on a crowded bus, someone will give up his or her seat. Likewise, someone might allow such persons to cut the queue, such as at a taxi stand.

Obey the Laws

Singapore has an exceptionally low crime rate, thanks to her very strict law enforcement policies. People who do not obey the laws are fined or imprisoned. This includes spitting, littering, smoking in prohibited areas, chewing gum, jaywalking, and neglecting to flush a toilet.

If certain actions, such as smoking or jaywalking, are not allowed, there will usually be a signboard to warn you.

Singapore is strict in enforcing her laws, even towards foreigners. Throughout the years, there have been many cases of foreigners who were punished because they violated the laws.