

Canadian Entrepreneurs in Hong Kong

by Connie M. Smith

Many people entertain thoughts of establishing a business in Hong Kong. However prior to heading out with your property agent to sign away the bulk of your savings on a five year lease, here are a few stories from several Canadians who have taken a walk on Hong Kong's entrepreneurial path.

With its relaxed regulations and free market attitude, Hong Kong attracts entrepreneurs – and, in some cases, brings out the entrepreneurial spirit hidden inside us. The latter could be said of Shelley Gunton and Brian Connolly, a couple who arrived in Hong Kong five years ago with their dog Joey. They had no idea at the time what a tremendous effect their canine friend would have on their lives.

Being pet lovers, Brian and Shelley were concerned when good-quality dog food was nowhere to be found in Hong Kong. Their extensive product search, which started out as a desire to keep Joey well fed, eventually resulted in Brian and Shelley acquiring the Hong Kong rights to IAMS Pet Foods. To this day, Shelley shakes her head as she talks of how they ended up in the dog food business and,

moreover, the ease with which they established Iceville Limited, their local company used to import IAMS pet foods.

The pet food venture, which began as a weekend and evening business on the side, turned full time for both Brian and Shelley approximately one year after its inception. With the two of them working full time at Iceville for the last two years, the business has grown to such an extent that they now supply IAMS pet foods to 80 retail outlets in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Macau and China.

The Canadian couple constantly keep their eyes and ears open for new additions to their product line, which, over the last few years, has expanded to include grooming supplies for pets. Brian and Shelley believe in the goods they sell and as a rule are only interested in adding top-quality products matched with good service.

About starting a business in Hong Kong, Shelley says, "Finding good products is not the problem; it's finding a niche in the marketplace at the right time." Keep your eyes and ears open, and watch and listen for what makes people tick."

IAMS pet foods was the first premium pet food on the Hong Kong market. However, in the past three years or so,

the number of competitors has grown to about a dozen.

Like so many companies in Hong Kong, Icehouse has to contend with the problems of working in a foreign country. Operating in a 98% Chinese market, they must rely on Chinese staff not only to bridge the language gap but also to evaluate promotional efforts through the eyes of a distinctly different culture. Shelley feels lucky to have developed such a strong team – an essential element of success in any business. Shelley says there are many untapped opportunities in Asia, particularly in Hong Kong. To set up a company, "It doesn't necessarily take a lot of capital or experience, and that is what so great about Hong Kong."

As a starting point, she suggests launching a business venture on the side and assessing the viability of leaping in full time before foregoing a steady income. She reminds us that there aren't the common expatriate benefits such as healthy housing allowance, a car and a company junk when you are just starting your own business!

Another successful Canadian entrepreneur living in Hong Kong is John Henderson, managing director of Pacific Rim Ventures Limited. Prior to setting up