

China – Getting Started and Best Practices

Language and Culture

To even the most experienced exporters, China is a challenging market. Some of the reasons for difficulty are self-evident. Some are less obvious. A few examples:

- Language differences are especially intimidating. More and more Chinese are gaining a basic fluency in English. You're probably not going to become fluent in Chinese, but it will be useful to learn some basic expressions – especially if you plan to travel outside the major cities. It will give you confidence in getting around and delight your Chinese friends. However, for most business transactions, information gathering and negotiations, you will need a skilled interpreter.
- Cultural differences present difficulties for parties doing business in China. It is easy to underestimate their importance. Subtle cues and nuances may be misunderstood. For example, many Chinese laugh or giggle when they are embarrassed or uncomfortable. Many Westerners react angrily in this situation because they think they're being laughed at!
- The Chinese avoid directness when it comes to telling you they cannot do something for you. In Western culture, we accept forthrightness – provided it is polite. But in China, people are apt to be very uncomfortable saying no to you. So often they don't say no; they may tell you your request "will be difficult", or they may avoid answering entirely. You may never hear another word about the matter, while you are expecting a reply or results, only to discover you misinterpreted their indirectness.

The best way to deal with cultural differences is to arm yourself with as much knowledge as possible about Chinese culture. Use the help of the Canadian Embassy, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the Canada China Business Council to find consultants who know the waters and can help you navigate. Talk to colleagues with experience in China. The Chinese are generally very accepting of Westerners and forgive cultural gaffes, but they may not know enough about Western culture to know you intended no offence.

Depending on the nature of your business, you may wish to explore entering China via Hong Kong. In terms of its business practices and culture, Hong Kong is a hybrid of Western and Chinese characteristics, enormously modern and sophisticated but with historical and family ties reaching deep into the heart of China.

Hong Kong exists to conduct business and therefore business in Hong Kong are extremely welcoming to new companies and their products, services, technology and ideas. In addition,