

SUCCESS STORIES

Hong Kong Gateway to China for Small B.C. Company

From bathroom and plumbing retailer to swimming pool and spa — and eventually construction material — wholesaler, a small Richmond, B.C., company has become 100 per cent export-based, with half of its sales to Hong Kong.

Bathroom City Enterprises Ltd. has been in business for nearly three decades, but it was only four years ago that it went into wholesale — and soon after started exporting.

DFAIT help crucial

“Our first venture into Hong Kong came some three years ago,” says the company’s Operations Manager Ali Tejani, “but not without some solid backing from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.”

After initial contact with DFAIT, Tejani went to the Commission for Canada in Hong Kong.

“Trade Commissioners there were of great assistance,” says Tejani, “from providing guidance on local trade culture and helping find interpreters, to assisting with credit reference and negotiating letters of credit with our first customers.”

According to Tejani, Hong Kong — and its huge neighbour, China — is not an easy market for Canadian companies to crack, so he strongly recommends working with DFAIT and Canada’s Trade Commissioners in the field.

“They were always there,” he recalls, “day or night, whenever we needed them. We couldn’t have done it without all their help.”

Totally different business culture

Tejani has seen many Canadian companies fail — with great loss of investment — in Hong Kong and China because they didn’t pay enough attention to human relations.

“Interpersonal relationships are key,” he says, “and you must cultivate these before you can even think of sitting down and talking business.”

“In other words, it’s not something you can take lightly,” he advises, “it’s not something that just happens. You have to be persistent,” he adds, “constantly going after customers who don’t like long speeches about your product but are more interested in human relations.”

According to Tejani, Canadian companies must also be adequately financed before going into that market.

“Hong Kong business people are very tough,” he warns. “They know every trick in the book, so when it comes down to business, they can be tough.”

A market worth pursuing

Bathroom City’s three-year presence in the Hong Kong and Chinese markets is leading it from success to success.

With a staff of only 25 — seven in Richmond and the rest in showrooms in Hong Kong and China — the company’s export list has topped 120 products, from plumbing, bath and kitchen cab-

inets and swimming pools to construction material, exterior doors, shower doors and windows.

“Most of our products come from Canada — much of it, like hardwood floors and Kindred, Steel Queen kitchen sinks, from Ontario,” says Tejani, “with the only items manufactured by our company being kitchen cabinets.”

Thanks to its marketing skills specially adapted to that market, Bathroom City has now become the sole China agent for the largest U.S. manufacturer of spas in the world (Sundance Spa) and Sta-Rite Industries, one of the largest pool pumps and accessories manufacturer in the world.

With close to half of its sales to Hong Kong being resold to China, the company has already established a solid presence in that huge country in anticipation of July when Hong Kong will again become part of China.

“Business is booming in many parts of China, especially Shanghai,” says Tejani, “but we are confident that Hong Kong will remain just as attractive as now.”

For more information on Bathroom City Enterprises Ltd. — its export markets include Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Taiwan — contact the company’s Operations Manager Ali Tejani.

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