

## Advanced Golden China tips

To Jim van Drunen Littel the Netherlands were always going to be too small. Bilingually raised and working for one of the best known consumer goods companies in the world, he goes international in 1986. Successfully managing a territory stretching from India to Japan for a large tobacco company, it is then time to realise other personal ambitions. Starting his own enterprise and learning Chinese, those are his goals. Van Drunen Littel goes back to university and lives with a Chinese family for several months to get a good understanding of the Chinese culture. In the meantime he's working on getting One2Call started: Interpretation, City Directions, Yellow Pages, Lonely Planet and lots more. All in one phone based service. In between calls he gives us a few golden tips.

"First of all it's useful for every foreign businessman in China to have insight into Chinese communication. A mistake we Westerners make in meetings is to listen too much to what the Chinese do say, and not enough to what they don't say. Knowing verbal and non-verbal communication is, in my experience, more important in China than anywhere else in the world. Doors will open much more quickly and you get to know a lot more about the market, if you make the effort to learn the Chinese language and culture. And for the moment, it will stay this way. Especially in every-day life, on the streets and in the hotels. For a taxi driver you have One2Call, but asking a big shot how his son's doing in his studies, you have to be able to do yourself. If you learn Chinese, your business partner appreciate that you're not in China to just fill your pockets for three years to then turn your back on him. Showing a long-term commitment to the partnership and China, is what will give you the much needed edge."

### High ambitions, committed targets low

"Furthermore, specifically for the consumer goods sector it's important to understand that, even as an established international brand, you can't attack China all at once. No matter how good that brand is. If your brand name is not known and you're not willing to share your technology with local partners, then to be honest, you need to be very patient and have very deep pockets. On top of that, the rollout-principle is strong here: China is too big to conquer in one go. A brand that is a market leader in Beijing may not even exist in Shanghai. So keep your ambitions high, but keep committed targets low."

### Service level

The image of the market in China is that the Chinese copy what is successful and produce it cheaper. You can't win that price war from a Chinese manufacturer. Looking for ways to succeed, you have little other choice than to compete on quality. Van Drunen Littel: "The Chinese middle-class buys mobile phones from Nokia and Sony Ericsson because they don't trust the Chinese manufacturer's quality. It's the same for service. I've noticed, certainly when employing personnel for One2Call, that good customer service is uncommon in China. Sometimes young ladies with call-centre experience apply for a job. You assume they know what customer service is, but it's usually disappointing. Getting my staff to the right service level requires long training. That investment pays off, simply because it is the best way you can compete as a Western company: quality in strategy, execution and service."

## Changing lives

Jim van Drunen Littel has been around in the international business world, and his family can attest to that. Constantly moving, from Belgium to Indonesia to Malaysia, back to Indonesia, then to Singapore, now to China. "The family of an expat has to put up with a lot. The cosy school in the suburbs becomes an international school, and blonde girls could get a lot of attention, which is not always welcome, especially in puberty. A partner who had a top position at home doesn't always find work in a new country. It happens all too often that a company appoints a manager for a position abroad, only to later discover that his family isn't up to the consequences involved. Also, it takes at least a year before you start to become fully effective in a senior position in China. So if your manager, after two years, needs to go home for his family, that is a heavy loss. You can reduce the chances of failing in this way, if you asses the family as well as the manager for suitability. For example, give them plenty of time to get to know the new home ground before the big decision is made: to go or not to go."

## Talent

The seasoned Van Drunen Littel has certainly made use of his talents. Is that the reason to now focus on investing in young Chinese entrepreneurial talent? "In Shanghai alone there is so much talent, you wouldn't believe. That talent is not restricted to the ones who speak good English. Foreign companies should be aware of this. Imagine that I want to employ an IT manager. It's tempting to hire someone who speaks English. But is he or she also the best person to run the IT department? It's worth your while to find a way to see through the broken English and find the best man or woman for the job, and then give them language lessons. Thé surest way to have the best of both worlds - Asian and Western - combined."

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