

TRADE SECRETS

A growing awareness of design and innovation amongst Chinese businesses makes it an exciting time to move into Asia but producing competitive global products 'Designed in China' is about much more than slick design. Stephen Knowles reports on IDC's experiences

With the Chinese market for design estimated at over £3 billion, China is, indisputably, an attractive prospect for UK designers. In 2007 Industrial Design Consultancy (IDC) was selected as part of UK Trade and Investment's 'China Design Taskforce', a carefully selected group of design agencies equipped to gain a foothold in this rapidly developing market. At that time IDC was at the beginning of an adventure in the Chinese market for product design. Two years on with projects completed

for Chinese clients, we can review our experience of finding and working with Chinese clients.

Following rapid industrialisation, product design and innovation has become a serious area of focus for government and business in China. The realisation that foreign agencies hold an international experience and design capability that opens doors into global markets has helped to generate demand for high end design. Yet, whilst the market seems ripe, working in China presents an array of



IDC designed and engineered an Automatic Electro-Defibrillator Training device (AED Trainer) for XFT.



Chinese marketing material.

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challenges, quite different from those in the UK. There is an inevitable process of education and learning, both in terms of how the designer works, how the company works and how they can best work together.

When expanding internationally, agencies have to decide how to manage any international business they will generate. Many companies seek to establish an international reputation in their field and attract work to their UK base from international companies around the world. Alternatively, agencies may seek to replicate

their organisation locally in specific overseas markets. Following research trips that included visiting design fairs, meeting with potential clients and talking with local consultancies, IDC decided on an in market presence, which despite requiring a bigger commitment, offered the best opportunity for growth.

Having made this decision we set about putting the pieces in place to make it happen. For large multinationals, opening an overseas office is a significant undertaking. For a small company it can be a huge drain on resources.

For companies considering a move into China here are some points to consider

Focus

The first thing to remember about China is that it is an enormous country with every kind of industry and all sizes of company, making every conceivable type of product. At first sight, this presents a huge opportunity but from a practical point of view it can be difficult to decide where and how to focus limited resources to avoid wasting time and money. In the UK, product design consultancies tend to be quite generalist. Clients understand that previous experience

designing in their industry is not essential and that the skills and approach a company brings is as important as product specific knowledge. This does not apply in China. Chinese companies want to see that you have designed their type of product.

Communication

For a small service based company trying to get into the Chinese market, language and communication is one of the single biggest challenges they will need to address. Of course, there will be clients who can communicate in English but they are in the minority and may be the only person within a client company. In order to successfully win and deliver work with non-English speaking clients, UK design agencies will

need marketing materials, proposals and contracts produced in Chinese and must be able to handle sales negotiations and project management with Chinese counterparts. Establishing a plan to deal with language, translation and communication is an essential element which should be considered at an early stage.

Refine your pitch

Along with focussing on the areas where you have good experience, demonstrating a strong track record of success is essential for success in China. Think why a Chinese client should choose you. 'We're close, convenient and have great ideas' is not sufficient when working internationally. Clients will be

comparing you against local design agencies charging a fraction of your fees and international agencies with huge marketing budgets and big reputations. It is therefore essential that you can communicate a clear benefit. Often this comes down to a financial payback. Relevant case studies that can demonstrate a strong return on investment are extremely valuable.

Be there and show commitment

Chinese companies are used to seeing foreigners come and go and so are naturally sceptical about how long newcomers will be around. It can therefore take several meetings over a period of time before you are taken seriously. Clients also expect to meet senior people, so sending a junior to key meetings will

not impress. All this means it can take time and be expensive to establish that first step but spending time in China to understand the culture, meet clients and make links to people who can assist you will prove well worthwhile.

Make sure you deliver

In China, reputation is very important and the process of recommendation and referral is very strong. Once trust has been established, repeat work will often follow and introductions to friends and colleagues can bring new opportunities. Conversely, if a client feels let down, the fallout can be much bigger than that relationship. Many companies have had big setbacks in China following a misunderstanding with a high profile client.

Be flexible but don't compromise on quality

Differences in language, culture and business environment teach the visitor in China to expect the unexpected. Keeping an open mind and being able to adapt your plans to suit the circumstances will help projects run more smoothly. One area not to compromise on, however, is design quality and attention to detail. Some Chinese suppliers and staff may press to cut corners but ultimately companies want to work with overseas designers to raise the standard of their products. Remove this benefit and there is no compelling reason why they should use you, maintain your standards and your reputation will grow.



The first product IDC designed for XFT was the CPR Assistant.



We quickly realised that managing this process without spending huge sums or adversely affecting the running of the main business was the key to success. Our strategy involved meeting people and establishing a network of trusted companies upon whom we could rely to help us operate, gain new business and deliver projects. We attended exhibitions and conferences, met prospects, had marketing material translated, worked with UK Trade and Investment, printed brochures, had poor translations redone, printed new brochures and through a process of mixing hard work with some large slices of luck we managed to pick up two clients within the first nine months of our China adventure.

One of these clients, Shenzhen Xunfengtong (XFT), began working with IDC last year. A specialist medium sized company, the business could be seen as representative of a new breed of Chinese SMEs looking to compete on a global stage. XFT general manager,

Mr Song, explains, "Our goal was to develop a product fit for the US and European markets as well as the domestic. Working with a Western design consultancy means a leap of faith for most Chinese businesses, not least because it is more expensive and communication is an issue. Before we started the relationship there were concerns over cultural distinctions, meeting deadlines, capabilities and, of course, the language barrier to consider. But if it worked out, we could see a range of benefits that outweighed our worries."

The language barrier is certainly the most self-evident stumbling block but it is by no means insurmountable. Some larger companies focused on world markets will have English speaking staff, but others will not. The leap of faith is still taking time to get over for many businesses and when they do, communication is paramount for cementing trust. As XFT found, whilst there is the option of working through translators, having a bilingual

member of the design team takes away the potential pain of misunderstandings, which have a knock-on effect with the delivery and success of a project.

XFT was keen to develop a family of products to compete with Western competitors in functionality, quality and design, as well as branding. The first product was a CPR Assistant for both domestic and global markets. Combining spoken life-saving instructions with a cleverly sculpted head and neck support, the product was a first for the medical markets in both Europe and China.

Dwelling on the research and concept exploration stages led to some major changes early on. The product's specification was modified to suit an international market. The original design incorporated back support, but research into CPR training, different anatomies and life saving approaches and techniques showed greater benefits in a specially sculpted, integrated neck and head support, which

opened the airway and steadied the body during CPR activity. Competitor research indicated that this was unique to the medical markets XFT were targeting. "Cultural differences can be a sticking point in terms of functionality as well as aesthetics. We needed a window into our foreign users' wants and needs. The results impacted on the design itself. Of course the aesthetics were important, but the understanding was the foundation," explains Song.

From IDC's point of view the process was also a valuable learning experience. XFT's

development project is typical of the timescales often involved in working alliances with Chinese companies. The product was taken from concept to tooling within a three month window and has already been introduced at Shenzhen Airport as well as the Asian Games. Since then IDC has completed a second project with XFT, designing and engineering an Automatic Electro-Defibrillator Training device (AED Trainer). There are plans to launch the products in the UK shortly.

The designer's role has always been to act

as a link between customer and client with communication at the heart of a successful working partnership. In China, that role becomes much more pronounced and the work involved much greater. Understanding the needs and aspirations of both client and their customers creates challenges but reduces the risk of failure and is the basis of innovation wherever in the world you operate. I

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CPR Assistant concept sketches.

