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SME Special Report

Overcoming language barriers

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By Lin Shi Hui

IT IS not easy for any entrepreneur to establish a business overseas singlehandedly, much less a Chinese woman unfamiliar with Germany. Ms Ong Lay Bin overcame language barriers, cultural differences and health problems in working with her German partner to establish her business in the country, eventually expanding its operations back to her home country of Singapore.

Ms Ong established O&L Consultancy Services together with RCG Relocation in Munich when she was 29 years old.

Before this, she was in charge of urban planning at the Housing & Development Board (HDB). She later went to work for an Australian market research firm that helps multinational corporations (MNCs) expand their operations in the Asian region.

She was subsequently employed by two more companies in related industries, accumulating more experience and expanding her network of contacts. Ms Ong requested her company for a transfer to Germany after her husband was sent to work there.

She was facing a major test in her life at the time. She had developed a serious condition in her hip area and the doctor said that the condition may recur within five years, which could lead to her being paralysed from the waist down. Therefore, Ms Ong had hoped to realise her entrepreneurial dreams before her condition worsens.

Even though she already had a high-paying and stable job and despite the fact that she could not speak fluent German, she chose to take the risk nonetheless by establishing her business in Munich. She remembered: 'My family members and friends thought I had gone mad for my decision to resign from my job.'

Ms Ong decided to venture into a familiar industry. When the company was established in 2003, its core business was focused on helping Asian companies, which were looking to move their employees to Munich, to find accommodation and provide consulting services.

The company later started to help German companies venture into the Chinese market. O&L Consultancy Services decided to expand its business to Asia in 2004. It set up office in Singapore to tap the enormous business opportunities in Asia helping Asian companies foray into Western markets. It was for this reason that Ms Ong returned to Singapore.

Ms Ong said: 'I think that was when the most difficult period in my career as an entrepreneur began. My family and partners were not by my side and I had to cope with my illness alone. I had no choice but to seek the help of ex-colleagues and classmates.'

The company eventually gained a foothold in Singapore following much hard work. It later expanded its business to cover markets such as China, Indonesia, Australia, the Middle East and Malaysia.

Helping companies find the 'best match' in foreign partners

As many as 80 per cent of the company's customers are made up of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) mainly from the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), F&B and retail sectors. Apart from helping them study the suitability of their products in the new markets, O&L Consultancy Services also helps to explore the best channels for them to enter the target markets as well as find distributors and other services.

Ms Ong pointed out that her company's strengths lie in having a global network as well as the rich experience of its consultants, which range from 10 to 30 years. Its market study materials can help companies find the 'best match' in terms of foreign partners.

She believes that the biggest challenge in this industry is the fact that most companies with the aim to expand overseas would normally expect to do it themselves and would only seek the help of professional companies if their strategies have failed.

O&L Consultancy Services has seen stable and strong growth in recent years. The company achieved a 100 per cent to 200 per cent increase in revenue after making the transition from a commission model to package-based business model. Its business has been growing at between 20 per cent and 30 per cent each year since 2007.

O&L Consultancy Services is now planning to diversify its customer base and vie for a stake in the education sector as part of its next step.

In addition, the company is also planning to enter the Vietnam market and has already started one project there.