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Expanding international sales

Mar-Bal looks east to China in boosting insulator business

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by Joan Tuppence



Each time he travels to China, Ron Poff finds more and more people speaking English.

"Especially the younger generation," says Mar-Bal Inc.'s manager of new business development, who is based in Virginia's New River Valley. "They want to converse on both a business and social level."

Often, the conversation is geared toward the American political system. "Younger Chinese know more about our leaders and our history than some U.S. citizens," observes Poff. "That's a compliment to us as a nation and also a compliment to them because they want to know more about America."

Ohio-based Mar-Bal, which has a manufacturing plant in Pulaski County, does business in several Chinese cities, including Beijing and Qingdao (known to westerners as Tsingtao). "We have 10 to 12 customers in China," Poff says.

The company ships proprietary standoff insulators, used to insulate some electrical currents, to several countries in Europe and Asia. "We began distributing those a couple of years ago," Poff says. "We did about \$3,000 in sales [at first] and last year around \$85,000."

The company's international business has grown steadily in the last five years. "Each year we add another two or three countries to the places where we export."

Poff finds that Chinese business owners take a personal interest in their vendors. "They want to know who you are," he says. "They decide from a personal standpoint as to whether they want to move on from a business standpoint. They may go to dinner two or three times before they actually want to talk business."

They also look for quick, detailed responses. "If they send an e-mail, they expect follow-up in 24 hours or less," Poff says. "That's interesting because Europeans might take days to respond."

Meeting with customers in southern China is easy for Poff. Often his suppliers or customers will arrange for transportation or the hotel will provide transportation to a meeting. Getting around is more difficult in northern China, where fewer people speak English. "I always rely on the hotel," he says. "They will have multilingual employees who can facilitate your travel."

Poff also has found resources through the Virginia Economic Development Partnership. "They have someone stationed in China. They also have partners there," he says. "If you're going for the first time, I would reach out to the VEDP."

Located in the northern portion of China on the Yellow Sea, Qingdao hosted the sailing events of the 2008 Olympics. "From an architectural standpoint, the area has a European influence. Germans were there in the 1800s," Poff says.

The German colonial period lasted into the early 1900s. During their time in the city, the Germans transformed it from a fishing village to a viable port city. Poff enjoys walking along the beaches and through local villages, many of which have a European feel.

Two popular tourist attractions are the Tsingtao Brewery (founded in 1903 as the Germania Brewery) and St. Michael's Cathedral. The brewery is known for its Tsingtao beer, which often is served at White House events when Chinese leaders visit. The cathedral also was built during the German period. "It's interesting to see a church in China," Poff says.

The city's economy

A seaport and navy base, Qingdao is located in China's Shandong province. It is the country's fourth-largest port. The economy includes companies and industries related to fishing, shipbuilding, manufacturing, distribution and technology. Companies headquartered in Qingdao include Haier, which makes and sells home appliances throughout the world; Hisense, an electronics company that produces multimedia, appliances, telecommunications and information technology; and Aucma, a high-tech company. Other companies in the city include Sinopec (China Petroleum and Chemical Corp.), offering everything from oil production to refined products, and Epiphone, which makes musical instruments.

Where to stay

Qingdao offers a large number of hotels. A few of the best rated include the luxurious Shangri-La Hotel, located in the city's business center with city or seaside views; Le Meridien Qingdao, in Wanda Plaza where there's a department store and supermarket as well as offices; and the Doubletree by Hilton Qingdao in the Chenyang district, in the northern part of the city. The Doubletree offers its own driving range. Another popular choice: the Intercontinental Hotel Qingdao located in the Olympic sailing village with sea and city views.

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