

Dunn Global speaks with us about the export business in China, humanitarian work in Africa and pork dumplings

By G.M. Giacomelli

“I didn’t have time for breakfast this morning. No time. Cup of coffee when I got up and some water just now,” blurts Matt Grundy, Vice President of Dunn Global. He promptly stands up and begins pacing. It’s 9:15 AM on a Monday, and the office has already been buzzing for two hours.

When asked what keeps him going, what serves as his “brain food”, President Jim Dunn answers with a laugh, “*Xiao mai*. Rice pork dumplings. Every morning without fail. I tried making them once, but I’ll stick to buying them on the street now.”

Upon arrival this morning we were greeted by Jim screaming [in a strange mix of Chinese and English] at no one in particular, Matt darting around the office, while the other employees were chattering away on the phone in Chinese. Elevated energy level? Check.

“Our goal is to develop our people, not just employ them.”

“The work environment is absolutely essential,” reiterates Dunn. “We want our employees to be excited to work here. While every day is not going to be a walk in the park – we do work long hours – we’re always doing team outings, dinners, lunches. We’re promoting a fun work environment, and want it to be open as well. Our goal is to develop our people, not just employ them. Recently, one of our guys bought a house, and we were extremely happy to see him take that step. Beyond every single project, our employees give us a lot back.”

One has to be sharp in the export business. Always thinking, always talking, and always searching for new avenues and new opportunities.

Dunn Global procures goods from all over Asia – this could be anything from toilet bowls to steel studs to windows – and prides itself on providing the quality and scheduling that clients in North America need. “We take a service oriented approach, says Grundy. “We’re constantly updating our clients to make them feel like they are part of the order. We spend endless hours at night on conference calls to let them know they have an office in China that’s looking out for them. We provide what our clients need and deliver it right to their door. Chinese pricing combined with the Western mind.”

“I believe we are first and foremost a service company,” Dunn adds. “We need to remember this, as we don’t own factories; we purchase goods. But we don’t just buy the materials and products and hope they arrive at the destination. We put ourselves into the process. We’re constantly working with our clients and suppliers. Last minute change in colour? No problem. While companies who work with Chinese suppliers from overseas might not be able to accomplish this, Dunn Global has the distinct advantage of being on the ground. Our service is our pride.”

“Our service
is our pride.”

Maybe it’s the fact that both Jim and Matt were born and raised in Canada, and maybe it’s that they grew up with service-first Canadian companies like Tim Horton’s and Canadian Tire, but whatever it is, it’s working.

Leaning back in his chair, Jim explains how he managed to end up in Shanghai, “Although I’m Canadian, raised in Alberta, I had the opportunity after university to work in Los Angeles for a large building company. We were not purchasing our materials from China at the time, so when I ended up coming over for six or seven weeks on different occasions, I realized that we should be buying directly in order to reduce the supply chain. Tracing it backwards you could say. Most of the materials that our company was using to build with were coming from China. Driving around in Alberta and California, I asked myself – when was the last time I saw a manufacturing factory here? Most of them are in China, not North America.”

“I knew that we should be going directly to the supplier,” Dunn continues. “So I spoke with some contacts that had China expertise and funding and pitched this idea to them. It took me a while to push myself and finally make the leap. But when an opportunity presents itself, it’s not in fact an opportunity unless you seize it. As you can see, things have worked out.”

Matt Grundy, on the other hand, was born and raised in the North West Territories, one of the more remote regions in Canada. We asked him to enlighten us on how one makes the leap from the Canadian arctic to the up and coming business capital of the world, Shanghai.

Still not having eaten, but managing a laugh, Matt clarifies, “Years ago I was working as a project manager for a large developer in the North West Territories. During a visit to China, I came to some of the same conclusions as Jim had. I saw that a lot of goods in Canada were imported, and knew it’d be much more efficient to buy straight from the source. I knew Jim was already in China and exporting goods back to Canada, as we

went to the same high school and still kept in touch, so I got my company to take a look at his sourcing capabilities. Three or four months after I returned to Canada Jim offered me a spot with the team in Shanghai. I'll admit, I was a little hesitant at first, but Jim was persistent."

While most of Dunn Global's clients are in Canada and the US, all of its sourcing and production is done in Asia. Inherent challenges of doing business in China run rampant, such as language barriers, red tape and different customs, to name but a few.

"I think miscommunication would be first and foremost on the list," Grundy states. "In any business it's inevitable, but miscommunication via the language barrier and the cultural divide increase this ten-fold. Luckily, we have proficient local employees to bridge the gap. While in North America it's the almighty dollar that overlooks every transaction, here in China it's *guanxi* [pronounced "guan-she"] – relationships. A common practice that we quickly adapted to is the *ganbei*. It literally translates to "dry cup", and you can probably guess what it means", he adds with a smile. "It's a common Chinese practice to drink the local liquor at business dinners, but more importantly it's a form of respect. Unfortunately the bottle never seems to end."

Jim glances out of his office window at an unfinished patio. "Okay," he says. "Let's move on to the important stuff. It looks a bit bare right now, but just wait until the weather clears up."

Aiming for a "greener" approach, the patio currently sports solar panels, used floor-boards from an old Communist factory, live bamboo stalks and a grass pathway.

"Once summer comes we're going to be working on that patio – palm trees, a hammock, a barbeque. We want to promote an atmosphere that is comfortable and fun. We actually have an architect coming in from North America to work on some projects with us, and he'll hopefully have a look at the patio."

But it's not all business and pleasure at Dunn Global. The company has recently partnered with an African initiative, The Village Experience, in an attempt to give back to the global community. This group works to better the lives of underprivileged communities in the developing world. In particular, Dunn Global is working with the group in Kenya to support various projects – ranging from the building of a new nursery school in a rural village, to supporting women living in poverty, to giving bicycles and

"While in North America it's the almighty dollar that overlooks every transaction, here in China it's *guanxi* – relationships."

sewing machines. These may seem only minor contributions, but they affect the lives of the people there tremendously.

Grundy talks about the company's involvement, "We realized that we have the ability to make a difference and to improve the quality of life for people outside of Shanghai too. And I think for Jim this is particularly significant because of his previous travels through Africa."

"...when an opportunity presents itself, it's not in fact an opportunity unless you seize it."

"It's true," says Dunn. "I lived in Africa for the better part of year, a while back. After working at an AIDS clinic in Togo, I travelled throughout most of the continent, getting to know the different regions and people. It was an incredible year, and will always have a part of my heart. Knowing that regardless of how many poor communities there are, we can always help, even just a bit. One sewing machine or one bike at a time can start to make a difference."

And Dunn Global is looking to make a difference going forward. The company has recently been exploring expansion options and sees many areas that they think have ample potential.

"Mexico is on the horizon, and India as well," declares Dunn. "One of the biggest question marks, I think, will be Africa. It has such potential, but remains one of the most difficult markets to operate in. We see a bright future there and would like to start looking at sourcing building materials for affordable and green housing. But right now we want to work on perfecting our supply chain strategy in China, and then we will look at offering other avenues for purchasing. If we can provide new options for our clients, everyone wins."