

ISEKI Vacuum Systems – passing the personality test

Iseki Vacuum Systems Limited is based in Daventry, Northants. From this East Midlands base it designs, manufactures and installs vacuum sewerage systems worldwide with the aid of local representative offices and licensees. The UK office provides the expertise required for developing and supporting the technology throughout the world.

Export business forms the majority of the company's sales: the United Kingdom represents only 10% of Iseki's turnover. The firm has been active for over a decade in Central and Eastern European countries such as Romania, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland; it is currently planning for expansion into Serbia, Slovenia and Slovakia.

Given the importance of markets outside its home country, it is little surprise that the organisation has made a commitment to communication with its customers in their own language.

A little goes a long way

"With our existing and potential clients speaking so many languages, we have to be realistic," admits Nigel Smith, who is Sales Director at IVS. "We can't expect to communicate competently in the customer's mother tongue in every market in which we operate. But our experience is that a little will go a long way in building good relationships with our clients."

Nigel himself is a firm believer in this philosophy. He has been selling in Hungary for a number of years now and has an active vocabulary of around 50 words. "It doesn't sound much," he admits, "but in most common social occasions I can find the right words or phrase to use, and customers have been particularly appreciative."

His experience is that in many of the countries where the company works, there is a special emphasis on building up the relationship at a personal level before progress can be made on the business front. It's what he calls 'passing the personality test'. And language – even a little of it – can play a big part in developing and cementing long-term relationships.

Different markets, different cultures

He stresses also the importance of being aware of cultural differences. He cites Poland as an example where communication during business meetings often appears very direct, and sometimes abrupt, to British sensibilities. But this, he says, is nothing to be offended by; it's simply their way of operating and the Poles can sometimes become frustrated by the English tendency to 'beat around the bush' in these circumstances.

Nigel's experience is that IVS's partners and contacts in Central and Eastern Europe also have high expectations about maintaining a close and regular contact. "In these markets," he says, "no news is definitely not good news. If things have gone quiet, it's usually for a reason, which needs investigating."

Small gestures bring big rewards

While recognising that language is a key to developing relationships with export markets, sometimes the small gestures can make a difference too. Whenever an overseas client visits the plant in Daventry, the country flag is erected outside the building: the Slovenian flag has just been purchased for a forthcoming visit.

When EU enlargement took place on May 1st 2004, an e-mail of welcome was sent to all contacts and clients in the countries that were joining. "This was extremely well received," comments Nigel. "It was something that took very little effort, but resulted in a further increase in rapport with our overseas contacts."

Translation – using help to get it right

It may not be possible for the company's personnel to speak every language of the Central and Eastern European region where they operate, but a commitment has been made to at least have literature available in a number of languages. Currently the company's brochure is available in thirteen languages; a more comprehensive information pack is available in five, including Serbian, Slovenian, Spanish, Slovakian and Romanian.

"Having our sales material translated was a major undertaking," admits Nigel, "but we had substantial help from Northants Business Link and the Northampton Chamber of Commerce." Bob Fisher, Senior International Trade Adviser, encouraged IVS to join the Passport to Export scheme, enabling them to access a financial assistance package to offset the translation costs. The team of professional translators ensured the high overall quality of the documents, and IVS's overseas contacts also had

an input to guarantee technical accuracy. The result was a set of documents which have already helped in gaining business for the company: it has recently won a contract in Serbia and is negotiating with potential partners in Slovenia.

Languages play big part in £400,000 contract

In addition, the Chamber of Commerce was able to supply a native Czech speaker to assist with final negotiations over a contract in the Czech Republic that the company had been pursuing for a number of years. The contract had been produced in both languages, and when three Czech contacts – only one of whom spoke English – visited Daventry to finalise the agreement, the Chamber of Commerce contact was able to act as an independent ‘adviser’ to both parties to help them to iron out the last details of the agreement. The contract, worth £400,000, was redrafted and signed the next day.

“Without having had someone present who could converse in both Czech and English, it would not have been possible to reach agreement,” says Nigel Smith. “It once again underlines the importance of taking languages seriously when doing business overseas.”

<p>Contacts</p> <p>Iseki RediVac www.iseki- vacuum.com</p>	<p>Regional Language Network East Midlands helps East Midlands companies access more international trade opportunities by breaking down language and cultural barriers. The RLN offers a central point of contact for information and support on international communications, and provides valuable commercial information through events, newsletters and briefings.</p> <p>RLN East Midlands, UK Trade and Investment, International Trade Centre, Innovation House, Riverside Park, Raynesway, Derby, DE21 7BF.</p> <p>Tel: 01332 826432 www.rln-eastmidlands.com</p>
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

