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Ask Inc.

Telling on a client contact; finding U.S. clients for Chinese businesses.

From: [Inc. Magazine, August 2005](#) | Page 46 **By:** Inc. Staff **Illustrations by:** Eric Palma

Q. One of my client contacts is underqualified for her position. Should I tell her superiors or keep my mouth shut?

Chris Christoudias, Digital Bungalow, Salem, Mass.

Slip into your customer's shoes for a moment. If you had an incompetent employee who was costing you money and butchering important relationships, wouldn't you want to know? Slip off the shoes: This woman is presumably inconveniencing your company as well. So clamming up hurts both you and the folks who pay your bills.

Still, your whistle-blowing doesn't have to be loud and shrill. Instead of complaining, suggest ways to solve the problem, recommends Chris Lowery, vice president of Chase Design Group, a Los Angeles branding agency. Lowery believes that managing projects means managing clients, and that includes informing employees' supervisors when he encounters subpar performance. So he will describe someone's limitations and then suggest parts of his or her job that could be delegated to a more qualified person.

Lowery may also give the struggling employee direct guidance—explaining industry lingo to neophytes, for example. “There's a learning curve at every job,” he says. “We always ask inexperienced people what we can do to help.”

Having registered your displeasure, you can police the problem by e-mailing progress reports to your contact. Treat it as an ordinary process to improve communication, but be sure to copy your contact's superiors.

Finally, the closeness of the business relationship should affect what you say and how you say it. With true business partners you can—and should—be frank; in casual relationships, where less is at stake and the other party may not trust your judgment, more reticence is advised. Occasionally a situation will crop up where kid gloves are necessary. When Lowery was working on a package redesign and relaunch for a key client, for example, his contact was underqualified, late on deadlines—and a good friend of the client's CEO. So Lowery and his team spent 30 hours devising a detailed daily game plan to get the project back on track. He never complained—and it turned out he didn't have to. Shortly after, the CEO's buddy got the boot.

Q. My company helps Chinese manufacturers in a wide array of industries sell products to U.S. retailers and distributors. How can I find customers here?

Daphne Bailor, Asian Access, Bend, Oreg.

Try to be all things to all people, and you end up being nothing to anyone. Online trading outfits such as Alibaba.

com offer U.S. buyers everything from ostrich feathers to cement, but Alibaba has hundreds of employees and sophisticated technology. You'd do better to start with two or three promising industries, says Anthony Boas, co-founder of Janssen Boas, a supply chain management firm with offices in New York City and Shanghai.

The advantage you have is living in the market: You can do field research that your foreign customers can't. That's the approach taken by Rich Youso, founder of SJ Creations, a company based in Leucadia, Calif., that sells foreign-made bath and home décor products to retailers such as Bed Bath & Beyond and TJ Maxx. Youso regularly walks the streets in southern California looking for stores that sell, say, loofahs and candles, and researches the retailers on the Web. He then calls the most promising companies and pitches his clients' products. To target distributors directly, simply look for their names on product labels.

Focusing on just a few industries also makes it feasible to attend trade shows—one of the best places to meet potential customers. Plan to attend about six shows a year, Boas says. Also, consider advertising in industry-specific trade publications, which charge much less than do consumer publications.

Finally, keep in mind that cross-cultural marriages can be tough. You are bringing together geographically disparate businesses that may have different languages, processes, and expectations. "Everything's going to take much longer than you'd think," warns Boas. "It's not a sprint, it's a marathon."

Looking for answers? Stumped by a thorny business problem? Let *Inc.* help. Send your questions to askinc@inc.com.

Resources

For tips on fostering strong relationships with clients, read *Clients for Life: Evolving From an Expert-for-Hire to an Extraordinary Adviser* by Jagdish Sheth and Andrew Sobel. *The Chinese Tao of Business* by George T. Haley, Usha C.V. Haley, and Chin Tiong Tan compares Chinese and Western business practices and offers strategies for thriving in a global economy.



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