

Building business links abroad

MICE events allow SMEs to network with targeted industry leaders who can help small business owners venture into different markets, says **VIKRAM KSHETTRY**

DURING my time at Visa, I have had the privilege to travel to various countries, from Japan to Russia. While these trips are mainly focused on the job at hand, what I find most enjoyable and beneficial are the relationships built along the way. These relationships not only help me with my work, but I find myself reaching out to this network time and again as we help one another establish new business opportunities.

For Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), these networks and relationships are that much more vital to their success. In 2011, the World Travel & Tourism Council released their find-

ings in a paper, "Business Travel: A Catalyst for Economic Performance", indicating that the majority of executive respondents believe business travel to be essential in increasing sales (74 per cent) and developing supplier partnerships (70 per cent).

Business travellers also estimated that 50 per cent of prospects became customers when an in-person meeting took place, compared to only 31 per cent when meetings were not conducted face-to-face.

Chinese business travellers noted the most significant benefit, indicating a 24 percentage point jump in conversion with an in-person meeting. This is

unsurprising, as culturally, this is how business relationships are made and strengthened in Asia.

While the idea of creating new business relationships overseas can be daunting, travel is crucial for SMEs looking for

growth. As the backbone of the economy, SMEs are under pressure to not only make up the bulk of the local wealth, but also expand horizons and grow beyond our shores. Research in Singapore by Kadence International on behalf of Visa at-

tests to this – 38 per cent of companies were said to be looking to increase their international trade, while 19 per cent planned to open new offices in the next 12 months.

China is increasingly a preferred location for busi-

ness expansion. China is not only the largest economy in Asia, but also the second-largest in the world. From what was previously a production and manufacturing focused economy, China has become one of the largest consumer economies in the world.

SMEs no longer just need to understand how to manufacture goods in China for export; they also need to understand how to access the Chinese consumer market.



Beneficial relationships: According to a recent paper, business travellers estimated that 50% of prospects became customers when an in-person meeting took place, compared to only 31% when meetings were not conducted face-to-face

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Greater effort

SMEs therefore need to put in greater effort to better understand Chinese consumers. This though, is not always easy. Language, lack of local expertise and experience, and differences in the legal landscape can be baffling, especially if you are venturing into China for the first time.

While there are various organisations assisting SMEs, these organisations tend to provide general services given the large number of people seeking assistance. For the small business owner, having access to bespoke services – as opposed to more general services – provided by trusted partners will be especially sought-after.

This is where MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions) events become especially valuable, as they allow SMEs to network and build connections with targeted industry leaders who can help small business owners venture into different markets.

At Visa, we recognised the importance of these events early on, and have created various platforms to help SMEs meet their expansion goals. For instance, Visa Business cardholders can have access to Visa Business Connect conferences in Shanghai and Beijing, organised by our travel partner, Peregrine Travel.

The conferences will include networking sessions with Chinese government representatives and industry leaders, offer first-hand insight into local business operations and legislation, and specialised business study tours to industrial sites and key business centres.

Visa also recently launched Visa MICE Connect, a free one-stop online portal which provides information on major international industry conventions and trade exhibitions, and features a dedicated travel consultant service to help organisations easily get to events of their choice.

A time-saving resource, the portal aims to link SMEs to business leaders through a comprehensive directory of over 150 inter-



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Helping hand: For the small business owner, having access to bespoke services provided by trusted partners will be especially sought-after

national trade shows and events from around the globe across a range of industries. SMEs interested in attending these events can make personalised travel arrangements, purchase event tickets, book local tours and arrange factory visits via our dedicated travel consultants, Peregrine Travel. Even better – these SMEs enjoy exclusive invitations to industry networking events and privileged access to VIP-only venues.

Exclusive access

We have heard from businesses that have successfully expanded abroad that exclusive access plays a big role in ensuring SMEs receive the help and opportunities that allow them to be one step ahead of the global competition. For payment solutions providers such as Visa, who have strong local ties to businesses in Singapore while also capable of offering global solutions and platforms, providing targeted and relevant access is the next step to helping local SMEs achieve their goals.

As an example, Visa has partnered with Singapore Airlines to provide Visa Business cardholders with competitive fares from June 1, 2012 onwards for the next six months, to make it even easier for them to travel to access overseas opportunities.

Visa has also had a unique partnership with

the Hong Kong Trade Development Council (HKTDC) since 2008. Through this partnership, Hong Kong exporters gain access to a number of cost-effective financial management solutions and marketing channels to go global. Moreover, business visitors to Hong Kong are able to connect instantly with thousands of suppliers and service providers in Hong Kong via the Visa Commercial Directory available on iPhone and Android phones.

It is clear that SMEs need to travel to achieve their growth ambitions. As a global company with a local presence, Visa believes it is essential to make travel as safe, efficient, and relevant as possible. Creating a bespoke travel experience for SMEs can be a trigger for economic growth.

Visa has worked with local and international financial institutions to create products enabling efficiency and safety. Depending on their needs, SMEs can choose from a suite of features, including cards that come with travel insurance and even cards that provide immigration services.

While the businesses themselves must decide where they want to grow, the companies that have already blazed a trail have a role to play in helping them get there.

The writer is the regional director of small business products (Asia-Pacific, Central Europe, Middle East and Africa) for Visa