

# BUILDING A BUSINESS OVERSEAS

## PREPARING YOURSELF FOR THE JOURNEY

BY DEBBIE NICOL

Luck of the draw, a quirk of fate, a victim of circumstances – call it what you will. An external force decided I was to be running my own business in a foreign country, and voilà, here I am. When leaving my native Australia 20 years ago with just one suitcase in tow, preparing to take up my first expatriate corporate role, I really couldn't have been happier. My curiosity and comfort grew with each transfer – from Malaysia to Singapore, UAE, Belgium, UK, Bangladesh, Egypt and back to UAE – because employer after employer was bestowing upon me genuine care, interest and those all-important expatriate benefits. Life could not have been better; then suddenly, boom – I was out on my own and my, oh my, how different it was. Nothing but discomfort all around!

Luckily I knew Dubai well from a previous phase of residency. It was, and still is, a land where the sky's the limit and stakes are high. After years of accolades and success in the corporate world, I suddenly found myself as a small fish in a big sea. How was I to stand out and be noticed? How was I to attract new business? From where could I gain assistance when my computer broke down? How could I have others recommend my services? What do I need to do now that I didn't need to consider as an employee? The list of questions grew as the days of startup dragged on; 'aloneness' in this big bustling city was becoming all-encompassing. The nature of my entry into an international entrepreneurial world made these questions even more pressing; I was plunged head first into business overnight with no insights or foresights.

The human spirit is a wonderful thing that has taken me to places within, which I didn't even know existed. It has also helped me define what I can only describe as a survival kit for anyone willing and able to take up the entrepreneurial journey away from home; metaphorically it forms a wonderful analogy of an overflowing backpack.

### The backpack itself

I highly recommend that any business be built upon a framework that demonstrates that what you have or do is in alignment with what 'they' want or need. A presupposition here is that you understand who 'they' are and what 'they' want. Having previously spent a wonderful six years in a highly demanding, well-reputed Dubai organization, I was very aware of what was on the corporate priority list, what approaches did and did not work, and what the country was aiming for. My services aligned well and, to this day, continue to do so. Without this

alignment, I've observed that businesses either fail or fulfill startup requirements without gaining business traction.

### Supporting clips that hold the backpack in place

No one can prosper in isolation of others, and hence a strong network of support for both the professional and personal arenas is essential.

#### Professional

Firstly, I needed to surround myself with like-minded suppliers; this proved to be particularly distressing in the fields of IT and marketing, both areas I understood least. Everyone recommended their friend, as that's how business runs here! I now know I was unaware of what I needed from each newfound 'friend', and hence could not be specific when forming relationships with them. Time has certainly sorted that out!

Secondly, I needed to become part of business communities and industry groups. It is here that most business intelligence flows, amazingly when you least expect it. I have learned to allow my intuition to steer me towards the most appropriate networks; initially I entered many cultural networks only to discover misaligned values. I also took on too many, with most only serving to steal my time and focus. Be discerning, be clear on what you want from them, and plan your strategy to find success.

Thirdly, it is most important to have a professional confidante, someone who is happy to be your ear, your shoulder to cry on and your trusted friend. I have found

over time that one must be willing to show their vulnerability to a confidante who is likely one step ahead of their own selves. Should you have the ability to form this relationship with a local person, seize the day!

#### Personal

I describe my business as my "baby", and hence it does have my continued attention. Being in contact with those at "home" can help maintain the balance and remind you who you are; just as mothers of first children can lose themselves to the child, so too can a business person.

Also, don't forget to surround yourself with fellow expats and business people, as they too will be experiencing the fabric of international life.

### Side pockets on the backpack

Side pockets come in handy on a backpack. Demonstrating a

healthy respect for the culture is of major importance and can at times be the make or break of a deal. Becoming "at one" with the culture is one thing, yet having ease of access to it is crucial during your daily work. It is not uncommon for me to make a call to someone who knows someone who knows someone who will point me in the correct direction, give me the tip I'm searching for, or translate a paragraph that makes all the difference.

Just as a tourist can be taken for a literal ride by a cunning taxi driver, so too can an expatriate business person, no matter how well-versed you are. Have those additional resources on standby at all times, nurture them regularly and call on them discerningly.

### Contents of the backpack

There are many smaller yet equally important contributors to international business success. These constantly nourish and add extra flavor to the journey. I often call these "I wish they could see this at home":

- A splattering of the foreign language has helped me incredibly; suffice it to say, the more the better. It is not only a sign of respect for the locals, but also a true desire to connect to "their way." Never a truer time to bring in the old adage: When in Rome, do as the Romans do!

- A big rock is another item in the backpack, one that is called "seek to understand before being understood." There have been many occasions that this has held me back from jumping into spaces that I simply don't belong. Make use of your local confidante when out of your depth of understanding.

- A strong relationship with a reputed lawyer is a must for any businessperson. Over time, as they educate you on law, feel free to educate them on your intention and approach. It's amazing what they pull out of their bag of tricks when least expected.

A backpack often accompanies me to campfire settings. It supports me as I relax with the beauty of the flame, the elegance of its dance and the sensuality of its movement. Just as a campfire is in a perpetual state of change, so too am I. My decade-long *furor* into the world of international business provides me a never-ending cocktail of emotion, excitement and challenge, along with exponential, unexpected and ongoing personal growth like never before. Yet, I constantly take the temperature:

- Am I still feeling intrigued, excited and in constant learning mode?
- Is my curiosity still piqued about both the business and the culture?
- What am I achieving that I wouldn't be at home?

Time and time again, the answer to these questions cements my feet firmly where they are. "When are you coming home?" curious Australians ask, to which I reply, "I think I may already be there!" ■



IMAGE COURTESY OF DEBBIE NICOL