Interview: Ingrid Reinli – General Manager, European Chamber of Commerce, Hong Kong



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Ingrid Reinli, general manager of the European Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong, discusses the chamber´s strategic priorities and how it serves to unify the European presence in the market. She also reflects on the relationship between Hong Kong and the many European countries investing into the region.

Why did you decide to take on the role as General Manager? What have been your first impressions of the chamber?

I have always had a very international outlook throughout my career – I like to consider myself a bit of a 'generalist'. My experience has primarily been in the areas of sales, marketing, and communications within the IT industry – Microsoft, Carlsberg Business Solutions, and Steria, for example. I worked in many locations such as Sweden, UK, Denmark and the United States, and have been in Hong Kong for some time now. When the opportunity to become General Manager of the chamber arose, I saw it as a good chance to represent European interests in Hong Kong.
From the European perspective, the council work that we do is a very powerful way of driving advocacy in the interests of European businesses. It is a unique approach to get perspectives on the hurdles as well as opportunities that European companies face in Hong Kong. We aim to work directly with the government in the region on adapting the regulations here – making the environment better to do business in Hong Kong.
[Featured_in]

How does the organization work in collaboration with the other European chambers in the country?

What is rather special about us is that we are ‘a chamber of chambers’, meaning we do not have any corporate members of our own. The current membership consists of 16 parties, all of which are European national chambers of commerce here in Hong Kong. We also have one member based in Macau – the Portuguese-Chinese Chamber of Commerce.

As General Manager, it is my mission to develop relationships with both the European chambers and their corporate members. The national chambers are the members of the European Chamber of Commerce, while private companies are constituents of the separate work groups, called business councils within our chamber.

Having direct contact helps to incentivize the right people, focusing on the right topics, to join our councils. We are looking to create a collaborative effort in the following areas of interest: Automotive, Environment, Financial Services, Intellectual Property, ICT and Wine & Spirits. I am planning to add Health wellbeing as the next business council. It is a reality that a single national chamber will not have as much advocacy power as one that represents European interests at large.

With so many members, how do you integrate their sometimes conflicting views and interests into the European Chamber’s perspective?

This is a process of balancing relationships and integrating the interests of the national chambers into the European Chamber’s viewpoints. As a unified force, we can have access to high-profile networking events that the national chambers might not be able to organize individually otherwise. For example, our two luncheons with the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Mrs Carrie Lam, this year, in Brussels and Hong Kong, were significant successes and allowed our member chambers and their stakeholders to dialogue with the highest level of the Hong Kong government. The first luncheon marked the start of Mrs Lam’s tour of Europe – the second being in Hong Kong where Mrs. Lam shared her thoughts, experiences, and ideas after the trip. This is the kind of attention government officials give to entities at a regional level. These events are a way for the chamber to gain access to higher government officials, not only here in Hong Kong, but in Europe as well.

How do you see Hong Kong developing its role in the Greater Bay Area?

Hong Kong wants to be, and already seems so, the innovation center and international port – the focal point of the Greater Bay Area. With the inauguration of the *Hong Kong*–Zhuhai–Macau *Bridge***,** the entire area will be even further connected. This will further increase trade in the area – bearing in mind Hong Kong already plays a very big role in the region as a financial, regulation, test centre and investment hub. Entities such as the Hong Kong Science and Technology Park have also been able to attract international attention from organizations such as The Karolinska Institute Ming Wai Lau Centre for Reparative Medicine, Hong Kong Institut Pasteur Research Centre and MIT Hong

Kong Innovation Node. Hong Kong therefore also is a nurturing environment for small businesses and start-ups.

Historically, many companies would have operations in Hong Kong but have also expanded offices to cities like Shanghai and Beijing to better reach the Chinese market. We have seen a move back to Hong Kong in certain industries for various reasons. Business can be more difficult to conduct in China; for instance, simply not being able to use some of the internet resources that foreign companies normally would, which may seem very trivial but is very important to smooth business operations.

As the 'One Country, Two Systems' approach is still valid for the next 30 years, this will continue to be a clear advantage for Hong Kong.

How closely do you collaborate with your counterparts in the other areas of China?

There are seven different chapters with nine offices for the European Chamber of Commerce in China. We have a chapter in Shenzhen, Macau, Taiwan, and many other areas. The chapters in China are very successful and have different set ups, allowing corporate membership directly.

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All European Chambers of Commerce around the world who are members of EBO (European Business Organisation) meet once a year in Brussels in June to share best practices, discuss issues and meet with EU Government officials.

On a final note, with your personal and professional experience across Europe and Asia, what are some of the best practices that can be shared between Hong Kong and European countries?

Public transportation is amazing here in Hong Kong. Not many places in Europe have such a widespread and thorough network. Hong Kong has also been very successful with start-ups and small business. They have been able to cultivate an atmosphere where, from an administrative standpoint, it is easy to create a business.

On the other hand, there are a few areas in the bureaucracy where Hong Kong can learn, from waste, to energy, to recycling, for example. In terms of infrastructure, in areas like handicap accessibility and cycling facilities, for example, there is room for improvement.

The relationship between Europe and Hong Kong is very good. Both support open and free trade between each other. We understand each other's business cultures and current market positioning. There is a shared understanding and trust as two developed markets – and I hope the European Chamber of Commerce will continue to make important contributions to advance this relationship further.

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