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COVER STORY

Georgia – new era for trade and investment

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Yintong talks with...

Tim Tian, managing director of Volitation Ltd

Giving Chinese business a voice



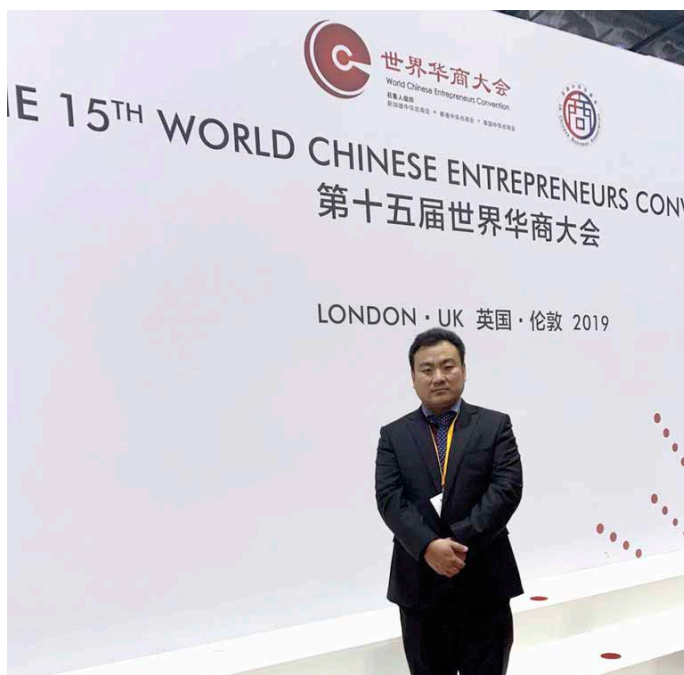
In 2006, Tim Tian founded Volitation to firstly supply the art market in the UK, then expanded into home furniture online, and other ebusinesses including warehousing. I met him recently and asked how business had fared during these challenging times.

Restructuring

“Luck has been on our side. We have been restructuring the company since late last year, starting to streamline our business, getting goods from the production line straight into customers’ hands.” This, he explained, resulted in more control to ensure customers received their goods safely and in a timely fashion – it was good for getting direct feedback from customers too. With this new strategy in place, the company had ordered in 30 containers of goods in January, so that it would have sufficient stock to see it through the Chinese New Year pause in production. Ordering such a large quantity could be seen as a risky business practice, especially as after the peak Christmas sale time, demand in January and February is usually flat. However, when Covid-19 struck, and production and deliveries from China came to a temporary halt, Volitation was in a good position.

Relaxed

Yet its core products are art equipment and furniture, not essential items such as food and other necessities. So, I wanted to know why the business did well? “With the government furlough scheme in place, people had to stay at home and were generally relaxed during



the months of March, April and May, so they had plenty of time to shop online. Therefore, instead of selling 20 containers worth of products in the same month last year, we sold 35, an average of 900 orders per week during those three months, instead of the usual 450.”

That could be seen as a piece of good fortune but Tian is realistic and knows that what we are facing is unprecedented. He is keen to consolidate his business strategy with a wide range of offerings: warehousing, cross-border e-commerce, the company’s own brand Bizili flagship store, and a consulting service.

Choice

Although still in his thirties, Tian has been running Volitation for 14 years. He arrived in the UK in 2000 and studied at the prestigious King’s College London. On completion of his degree he was faced with a choice between returning to China and working in trade there like his highly-successful father or setting up in the UK.

“I felt that my father had made a name for himself in our hometown, so I wanted to discover a new route for myself. By happy coincidence,

my wife – then girlfriend – was in the same position, and she shared and supported my ambition and ideas.” In June 2006, they registered a company, first in Birmingham, then moved down to London.

Shake-up

The first few years were tough. While Tian managed to find reliable and quality products to supply the art industry, the UK retail market was saturated and large retail outlets preferred to work with their regular suppliers. It was impossible to break into the mainstream market. However, the financial crisis in 2008 forced a market shake-up. Large companies were forced to look further afield for good quality and more competitively priced products and more flexible services. Having been around for a few years, Volitation was experienced and ready to seize the opportunity with industry giants like Argos, TK Maxx and Boots becoming clients. Now it supplies 400 retail shops. “No doubt, 2008 was our turning point,” Tim reflects.

Meanwhile, Tian was increasingly asked by his friends in China to help with product storage and logistics. This led to his interest in

“However, when Covid-19 struck, and production and deliveries from China came to a temporary halt, Volitation was in a good position.”

warehousing which has now become a key part of his business. “We now have about 20 containers of goods delivered to the UK monthly, selling through half a dozen online platforms. Volitation also operates seven warehouses with storage area of 100,000m² in the UK and China.”

What other ambitions are left for Tim Tian to achieve? Ultimately he hopes to get his company listed but is content also to continue to promote business exchange between the UK and Tianjin, thus helping his hometown to develop business internationally.

Connect

During our talk, Tim Tian’s father was frequently mentioned. He introduced him to his first supplier, for example, and he showed unwavering belief during the challenging early years of the business. There is no doubt his father has been a significant figure in his life and career. Now that Tian has a 10-year-old son of his own, what is his hope for him? “The overseas Chinese people generally keep a low profile. I hope my son will give us a voice by becoming involved in politics here or be a diplomat and a conduit to connect countries,” he enthuses.

www.volitation.co

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