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Foreign turned familiar

Danish entrepreneur out to create motivating Canadian offices

Presented by



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Tim Fraser/National Post

When Danish entrepreneur Mette Keating first started her business in Canada, she told potential clients she offered neo-feng shui services. "Is it feng shui?" they asked. "Not really, it's much more than that," she would reply. "Is it about colour consulting? Decor?" Again, her answer would be "not really."

In Denmark, where Ms. Keating completed several years of neo-feng shui training and started a successful business, it is a mainstream modern design concept used in homes and offices to improve mood, productivity and efficiency through changes to lighting, furniture positioning and colour themes.

When she moved to Toronto in 2007 and launched InDevision with a partner, she was surprised to learn Canadians weren't familiar with the concept. Once she explained it, they still didn't seem to recognize a need for it. Marketing initiatives and partnerships went a long way toward changing this, but altering her message ultimately had the biggest impact.

"A lot of companies here are more conservative and old-fashioned in that it doesn't matter what the office environment looks like -- it's just a place you work," says Ms. Keating, whose target market is small and medium-sized companies. While many companies recognize their offices are not pleasant environments to work in, she says, they don't do anything about it. "They don't take the step; they don't require it. In Denmark, people require more of their space."

Ms. Keating's problems are typical for entrepreneurs trying to penetrate a market that is foreign to them. "Often, the new product is not understood by the local market either because the timing isn't right or it's too complicated," says Dave Valliere, associate professor of entrepreneurship and strategy at Ryerson University's Ted Rogers School of Management.

"The second more difficult problem is when customers understand it, but don't know they have a need for it," he says. Entrepreneurs can end up spending a lot of time and money trying to convince customers they need it.

Conducting market research beforehand is essential, says Eileen Fischer, a marketing professor and director of entrepreneurial studies at York University's Schulich School of Business. "Rule No. 1 is to know the market you're going into and how it differs -- don't go on hunches and instincts."

Luckily for Ms. Keating, her hunch Canadian businesses could be persuaded to change their minds was right. Her business is growing steadily, but it hasn't been easy -- or cost-effective. In the past two years, she has spent a lot of time and money on marketing; she organizes workshops, attends seminars and networking events, and writes a monthly newsletter. She has created a Web site and a brochure, and is writing a book. She also plans to put a podcast on her Web site and distribute informational CDs to clients.

Ms. Keating also joined the Centre for Social Innovation, an organization that supports businesses with social causes. It gives her access to office space, the opportunity to promote events to 4,000 people who receive the company newsletter, and allows her to form partnerships with any of the 85 other member businesses.

It is essential to work with someone who knows the market, Ms. Fischer says. Working with someone in a distributorship, partnership or other relationship can help leverage a new business with little knowledge of the local market.

Ms. Keating saw the biggest change last year, when she packaged her services into a program called the "Office Alive Solution" with the help of Toronto branding and specialist firm Bishop Information Group. Since then, she says, business has increased 300%.

The program simplifies what she does -- tackling "dead office syndrome" (the term she coined to define dull, uninspiring office environments) - and breaks down the process into simple steps. "I needed to have a clearer, stronger message than the one I had," Ms. Keating says. "It was really about adjusting my product into something people get."

Positioning is another way to get customers to understand a foreign product, Mr. Valliere says. It involves making an analogy between it and an existing one, highlighting the difference and why it makes it better. "For example, you can say, 'it's just like Coca-Cola, but it's vitamin-rich,' " he says.

Ms. Keating's potential clients were cynical about the effects of her services. "They would ask, 'how much will it improve my bottom line? Why would I want to spend money on this?' " she says. Her response was to compile statistics from European and U.S. studies, showing as much as a 21% rise in productivity as a result of a motivating office environment. She also surveys clients' employees before and after the work is done, and often finds there is a 20% improvement in efficiency and productivity.

She expects neo-feng shui to take off in North America in the coming years. When it does, she will be well-positioned to benefit from it.

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