



MODELS FOR SUCCESS:

U.S.-CHINA COOPERATION ON STANDARDS, CONFORMITY ASSESSMENT AND TECHNICAL REGULATIONS (SCATR)

Case Study:

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Standards and conformity assessment play a crucial role in the overall U.S.-China trade picture. The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) developed its China program and launched its Standards Portal (www.StandardsPortal.org) to advance the interests of its members whose activities and attention have been keenly focused in this market. Through the portal, the Institute provides essential information and tools to aid entry into the U.S. and Chinese markets. The following case study presents the perspective of a U.S.-based organization (ASTM International) that has been successful in addressing standards, conformity assessment and technical regulations (SCATR) opportunities in China.

What is your organization's history in China?

ASTM standards have been in use by Chinese standardization research institutes in China since the 1950s and by Chinese enterprises since the 1960s. In the late 1980s, ASTM sent its first delegation to visit Chinese officials and explore opportunities for cooperation with Chinese standardization representatives. In 1990, ASTM signed an agreement with the China Association for Standardization (CAS) to translate one issue of ASTM's magazine, "Standardization News," per year and to publicize it within the Chinese market. This translation program helped popularize ASTM standards more broadly in China. Simultaneously, these continuous communications resulted in further cooperation with other Chinese standardization organizations, including the cooperation agreements with the China National Institute for Standardization (CNIS) and the Shanghai Institute for Standardization (SIS) in 2003 and a memorandum of understanding with the Standardization Administration of China (SAC) in 2004.

What have been your organization's objectives in China?

ASTM's current objective is to promote the use and acceptance of ASTM standards and

increase membership. ASTM also hopes to encourage the appropriate use of its standards so that they are not taken piecemeal. Piecemeal use threatens the integrity of the standard and quality of the ASTM name in China.

How would you characterize your organization's progress toward achieving these objectives?

ASTM has made great progress toward its two objectives over the past several years. For example, through its Memorandum of Understanding with the Standardization Administration of China (SAC), ASTM gained over 40 new members in 2005. Additionally, ASTM is being approached by Chinese standardization institutes and enterprises wishing to work with ASTM to appropriately adopt and use ASTM standards.

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ASTM has launched a translation program to make adoption easier than before. In the past, Chinese adopters would first translate ASTM standards and then quote a portion of the unofficial translation into their own Chinese standards. This usage pattern made it difficult for ASTM to monitor and to provide support. Now we are working with SAC to make legal translations of ASTM standards available in China. In the future, ASTM hopes that those who use and adopt our standards will reference and use the officially translated content. This will help to ensure that the translation is correct and to reduce misunderstandings or misapplications due to language barriers. In addition to encouraging increased use and adoption of ASTM standards, the translation program will help sell ASTM standards in China.

ASTM has received increasing inquiries on testing and certification programs for our

standards in China. This leads us to believe that there are some certification-related obstacles existing in trading activities between Chinese companies and foreign (non-Chinese) companies. We see the acceptance of ASTM standards as equivalent to their relevant Chinese technical regulations as one way to remove such obstacles. Currently many Chinese companies are subjected to Chinese certification requirements based on ASTM standards. However, as many of these certifications are not commonly recognized in the U.S. market, they can not directly use these Chinese certifications to enter the U.S. market. By encouraging the Chinese government and enterprises to appropriately adopt complete ASTM standards (as opposed to picking and choosing sections piecemeal), we can foster common application and usage of standards between Chinese and foreign enterprises. Once we reach this point, the call for commonly accepted certification programs will be significantly stronger both from foreign and Chinese manufacturers.

ASTM is now hoping to expand its cooperation with SAC, CNIS and SIS and to bring in industry associations and local organizations to encourage them to use and adopt ASTM standards and to send more experts to participate in ASTM committees.

What activities have been effective and what activities have been ineffective in achieving your objectives?

Most programs have been successful and our partners in China have been very open to our proposals. Just getting started is very important—each program has taught us more and given more information, helping us continue to refine our approach.

Effective activities include training, advocacy, answering questions and other technical support, and being highly visibly through meetings and seminars.

In the early phases of our cooperation with China, we focused on sending foreign experts to China to train Chinese standards and enterprise experts on general or sector-specific standardization training topics such as environment, petroleum, construction, or textiles. Currently, we are increasingly focused on taking a "train the trainer"

approach in China. Through our guest researcher program, we have invited several Chinese experts to ASTM to get one or two months of training in the U.S. After spending this time learning with us, we prepare and encourage them to train their colleagues in China. Not only does this approach provide us with a greater “bang for the buck” with existing resources, but we also find that there are times when training and education is at times more effective in China when it comes from fellow Chinese. Not only does a Chinese trainer have a shared language, per-

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spective and frame of reference as the students, but this approach also helps us to avoid the perception that we are the big Americans coming to tell China what to do. It is very important to treat the training philosophy carefully in China. Training is necessary in China and they realize this; however, it is important for U.S. organizations to avoid coming across as arrogant or superior in such pursuits. In English, the terms “training” and “education” have a rather neutral connotation. However, in Chinese they carry the connotation of a superior teacher addressing inferior students. We have chosen to think of our training as information (“Jiaoliu” in Chinese, as opposed to “peixun” or “jiaoyu”) and to really view it as a two-way street. In this way, we have held many effective sessions in China, and have found this to also provide an opportunity for important feedback from our users and partners.

When we have the chance to meet with Chinese officials, and other organizations, we will generally avoid asking them to change their thinking on controversial topics. Rather than engaging in overt lobbying efforts, we focus our discussions on concrete, specific problems or projects. Using this as the foundation for our relationships and cooperation, we can then sparingly mix in some “light ref-

erences” to more sensitive topics.

We provide technical support to the users of and stakeholders in our standards, and publicize this service wherever possible. Inquiries regularly come in through email and telephone, or conferences and meetings dedicated to answering questions or concerns.

Visiting Chinese standardization institutes and enterprises, and other organizations related to standards (testing, certification, trade associations), and participating in seminars has been an effective way to raise visibility for ASTM.

We have found it to be ineffective to pursue a one-time meeting or conference with no follow-up plan. Many U.S. organizations are surprised when, after a productive meeting with Chinese partners, there is very little response or follow-up from our Chinese partners. In fact, this is quite common in China, where “out of sight” quickly becomes “out of mind.” It is important to actively follow up after meetings if you want to see next steps. At times, this may even require multiple follow-ups. Unlike the U.S., where this would indicate that an organization is no longer interested in working together, in China it generally means simply that the organization is currently focusing on other things.

It is also important to remember that the Chinese sense of timing differs from the typical U.S. timeline. Chinese tend to procrastinate until the last minute, while U.S. will begin to act well in advance. You may hear your counterpart say, “In principle, we agree,” but then find it impossible to confirm any specific details until just before the event. It always comes through, but creates a lot of stress for U.S. stakeholders. The local representative often gets caught in a cultural clash between U.S. and Chinese organizational behavior. I have found that it helps to put yourself in the shoes of your Chinese counterpart and recognize that they will have little ability to get the attention of their colleagues until just before the event. Keeping this in mind will help you explain your own position more clearly to them—why you need to keep calling so much and push for specifics. It is very important to show that you respect their scheduling pressure. Attitude is very important in this and other communication—to show compassion and understanding of the Chinese position—to push without pushing.

What advice would you give to organizations interested in becoming active in China?

For American companies, they should understand Chinese people’s thinking and behavior and not just bring American attitudes and thinking to China. First listen, and then speak. Come with an open mind; don’t expect to come and change China. Success will come from a mutual exchange: the U.S. changing China and China changing the U.S. Approach your Chinese counterpart as an equal partner.

The first-time visitor should consider participating in a conference or scheduling a “courtesy visit” with their counterpart organizations or peer companies. These activities have a relatively low barrier for the organization that is new to China, and will help it learn more about its Chinese partners and their needs. As a second phase, the U.S. organization could then initiate a cooperative program or initiative, looking to “jump in” as soon as possible. Talk without action is generally not regarded highly in China. It’s important to put forward a concrete request or proposal (or ask your Chinese counterparts to provide a proposal) fairly quickly. Start small, but expect these “baby steps” to bring more insight and opportunities.

About the Author

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