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.

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”
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China and they realize this; however, it is
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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 connota-
tion 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 foun-
dation 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 dedi-
cated to answering questions or concerns.
Visiting Chinese standardization insti-
tutes and enterprises, and other organizations
related to standards (testing, certification,
trade associations), and participating in semi-
nars has been an effective way to raise visibil-
ity 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 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 indi-
cate that an organization is no longer interest-
ed in working together, in China it generally
means simply that the organization is current-
ly focusing on other things.

It is also important to remember that the
Chinese sense of timing differs from the typi-
cal U.S. timeline. Chinese tend to procrasti-
nate 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 repre-
sentative 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 counter-
part 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 impor-
tant in this and other communication—to
show compassion and understanding of the
Chinese position—to push without pushing.

Success will come from a
mutual exchange: the U.S.
changing China and
China changing the U.S.

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

For American companies, they should under-
stand 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 organi-
izations or peer companies. These activities
have a relatively low barrier for the organiza-
tion 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 gen-
erally 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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