

The Canton Fair



By Dan Wenke

The Chinese Export Commodities Fair, also called the Canton Fair, is held in Spring and Autumn since it was inaugurated in 1957. It is China's largest trade fair for all products, from picture frames to military weapons. It is so large that it is held in two five-day sessions with a five-day interval in between. For frames, Phase II of this show (held this year April 25-30 and October 20-25) is the one to attend. The website, www.cantonfair.org.cn, offers registration, hotel, and other general information.

Most framing vendors are grouped together. Since this is China, it can get somewhat complicated, but it is still easier than going there to source all on your own. As with any trade show, there are tips that can save you time and money and make your trip worthwhile.

GETTING TO AND IN CHINA

Canton, otherwise known as "Guangzhou," is in southern China close to Hong Kong. Some U.S. carriers now fly direct to Canton. Most fly direct to either Shanghai or

Hong Kong, where you can get connecting flights to Canton. It is also possible to take a train from the Hong Kong border (Shenzhen to Canton). There is another show in Hong Kong that runs concurrently with the Canton Fair; it is mostly Hong Kong and trading companies, so most products are much higher.

You will need a visa, which can be obtained from the Chinese Embassy. A passport service is preferable, even if it means paying a premium for them to handle the visa. Your travel agent should have a contact for it. There are a number of different visas available for travel to China: Single Entry Visa, Double Entry Visa, 6 Month Visa, and 12 Month Visa. An honest passport service should be able to obtain the Double Entry or 6 month Visa for a good price. If you find good sources at the show, you should plan to visit them within six months.

HOTELS IN CANTON

Reservations can be made from the website, but using an American or Hong Kong travel agent is preferable. This show is widely attended, and rooms go for a premium. It

is possible to find a good hotel for \$140 to \$175 a night. The best and most convenient hotel is the Marriott China Hotel, which costs about \$400 a night. It is across the street from the old fair grounds and is very Americanized. Expect to spend \$30 to \$50 for a cheeseburger and soda. For a more complete listing of hotels, visit www.cantontradefair.com/hotell/index.htm.

From personal experience, I've found it prudent to use a travel agent. A year ago my hotel room was given to someone else. The problem was quickly solved when I took a more expensive room. I paid the price and then went back to my travel agent for a refund of the difference.

ENTRY TO THE FAIR

You can register on line and save some time, but you will still need to bring ID photos with you or have them taken. The entry badge will have your photo on it for the security check. The process is somewhat chaotic and gives meaning to the term "Chinese Fire Drill."

With the exception of hotels and major restaurants,



most things in China are bought on a cash basis. In cities like Canton, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Beijing, most ATM machines will disburse Chinese money (RMB) Cash machines are everywhere in smaller towns, but they do not work for American or even Hong Kong bank cards. So bring cash.

AT THE FAIR

The areas for framing are spread far apart. The Dong Feng Hotel across the street (down the street from the Marriott) holds the exhibitors that are too large for the main area. You cannot miss it. Entry is on the right side of the McDonald's that's attached to the Dong Feng. In addition to frames, paintings, mirrors, rattan frames, and wire reindeer, you can also find fake purses and watches. This part of the fair can be visited after show hours, so spend your days at the main fairgrounds. Just don't order until you have been in the Dong Feng exhibit hall. You will not be disappointed.

TRANSLATORS

Years ago China was not set up for foreigners. That has changed. Most companies will have someone who speaks some English. My advice is to spend the first day looking.

If you truly need translators, they are standing in hoards holding signs. Test their English skills in conversation before you hire them. Be aware that they will be offered and will gladly accept commission from any company they help you buy from.

EXHIBITORS

Back in the days of the controlled market only trading companies were allowed to exhibit, and manufacturers had to go through traders. Today many of the larger manufacturers have their own export permits, and it is almost impossible to tell if a company is a trader or manufacturer at first glance. Despite that, you will find a number of the largest framing manufacturers in China exhibiting at the show, showing a wide range of products.

You will pay more if you buy from a non-manufacturer, and you won't have direct contact with the company if you do. Try to establish contact with the manufacturer. You will be quoted an array of prices. The cheapest ones are usually teaser prices, and your chance of getting shipment will be risky. You will have to visit the factory if you are serious about developing a good relationship. A word to the wise: check everything many times.

The exhibitors will also size you up. They gauge things by 40' containers per month and per year. If you are thinking of consolidating goods to make up a 20' container, stay home. If you have multi-container business monthly or annually, this is the place for you.

LETTERS OF CREDIT

The import business is not built on vendor credit. You usually have to pay with a letter of credit on site or make a 30% deposit, with the balance due on shipment. Make sure you can afford this.

FOLLOW UP

You will collect lots of information at the fair. This is only a start. You need to "get off the bus" and visit a few sources after the fair. This will determine if you have found the real source as well as who can actually make your products. Build extra

time into your trip to visit factories. The most serious companies will invite you and will pick you up at the nearest airport and make hotel arrangements for you. This is critical.

The Canton Fair is an exercise in organization. Your job is to find the right fit for your company in buying from China. The best place to begin the process is the Canton Fair. ■

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