

Developing a Market Niche for U.S. Agribusiness in Northeast China Using A Private-Public Relationship

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This article provides a methodology to develop agricultural market niches to facilitate trade and investments that will expand sales of U.S. agricultural products to China. It represents applied agribusiness research to increase U.S. foreign agricultural sales. An important element is training workshops designed to provide market information and build business relationships, “quanxi”, between Chinese officials and entrepreneurs and U.S. agribusinesses. The project, with the emerging economic development and market needs of China in mind, commences with Angus cattle breeding materials (embryos, *etc.*) and corn products. The research is funded by the USDA’s Foreign Agricultural Service and California’s Agricultural Research Initiative.

Introduction

The United States has a huge balance of trade deficit. Food and agricultural trade has a positive balance of trade, thus keeping the total balance of trade deficit lower than it otherwise would be (Economic Report of the President 2003). Export sales increases for food and agriculture would not only reduce the total trade deficit, it would also increase the gross domestic product of the U.S. and for states such as California. Both the U.S. and California are “mature” economies with low income elasticities (the relationships between the percentage increases in income and the resulting increases in demand) for agricultural goods (FAS, 1998). Therefore increases in national and state real incomes have little impact on increasing the demand agricultural goods and on agribusiness sales.

Emerging markets provide fertile ground for expanding agricultural exports. These are non-developed countries that have rapidly increasing economic growth rates, which combined with higher demand elasticities of income for food and agriculture than exist in the U.S. and the marginal propensity to import, provide opportunities for exporting U.S. products (FAS, 1998). Emerging market countries are designated so by the Department of Commerce and the USDA’s Foreign Agricultural Service. Taking advantage of such opportunities entail two sides: assessing the market and creating market niches in the emerging markets country (demand side), and finding and assessing the capabilities of U.S. agribusiness to supply that foreign demand.

Moreover, market assessment and sales in other countries involves working with people from different cultures whose ways of personal and business interactions differ significantly from those of the US. Lack of understanding of this may thwart a potentially successful business arrangement and export sale. For example, when U.S. agribusiness managers interact, they spend a short period of time on “small talk” to gain some personal understanding of each other, and then shortly “talk business”. In many other cultures, several days are spent socializing. Once the host country managers feel comfortable with the U.S. person, then, and only then, will they commence discussing business. This leads to impatience, frustration, and loss of business to those unaware of differences in business culture (Ball et al., 2002).

What is required to successfully export is a model to follow. The model should include demand and supply market assessment, along with a mechanism for bridging the cultural/

business divide. Increasing emphasis is being given to establishing relationships between the private sector and public entities, such as universities. This is done to attack societal problems and to address the competitiveness and profitability of U.S. industry, both on the domestic and international stage.

Sino-US Alliances has developed such a private-public model for increasing U.S. agricultural exports and is in the process of using and refining it for Northeast China (an emerging market). Sino-US is a partnership between a faculty member at a California State University and two small business people. The product lines are Angus breeding inputs (embryos, semen, and breeding stock) and High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS), a processed corn product.

The article proceeds as follows: 1) examine the model, 2) discuss experiences with applying the model to date, and 3) explore challenges and lessons learned.

The Players and Project Origins

The development and implementation of a project is not a stochastic process, it depends on the skills and talents of the team of people involved. Also, the project concepts do not appear at one point in time, but often are developed over a period of time in response to related activities that preceded its inception.

The Players

The members of Sino-US Agricultural Alliances, the project team, are the principal author, the co-author, and one other individual. The main key to any endeavor involving a team of people is their backgrounds and talents, as well as their ability to work together. To understand the project and the partnership requires an understanding of the project team members and how their diversity becomes key to the success of the model.

Ms. Bryant, team member, is the president of The Bryant Company International, an international marketing and public relations firm. She was strongly connected with the Tom Bradley Administration when he was mayor of Los Angeles working with the 1984 Olympics. Because of her work as Director of Corporate Affairs for the Asian Pacific Mart (APM), she served as chair of the International Sub-committee for Los Angeles Mayor Riordan's Minority Business Opportunity Committee (MBOC). Through her work with the city she has established relationships with many in the racially diverse local business community as well as international contacts globally. Ms. Bryant and Mr. T, the third team member, worked together in APM bringing Chinese delegations and other groups from the Pacific Rim for trade purposes to the Southern California.

Mr. T, team member, is a business owner. He was one of the past owners of APM which was a 64,000 square foot mart specializing in aiding American companies for trade facilitation for the Pacific Rim. Now he is president of A-Pacific Resource Management (A-PRM). Trained as an architect and a licensed contractor, Mr. T is a developer and has had extensive projects in China. He was born and raised on a farm in Taiwan and is fluent in Mandarin Chinese and understands the Chinese culture. Mr. T has strong "quanxi" (qwan shi), special connections with "the right people", within many provincial governments in China as well as the central government. It was Mr. T's original concept on which the agricultural model was created. He, along with Ms. Bryant, expanded the concept and brought it to Dr. Weidman in 1995.

Dr. Weidman, the principle author and Project Team Leader, is professor of Food Marketing and Agribusiness Management, specializing in international agriculture, at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona (Cal Poly Pomona). His academic background is in agricultural economics. He also served as a Peace Corps volunteer from 1969 to 1971 in the villages of Thailand working with small farmers as a community development/agricultural extension agent. This background, along with other overseas experiences, has made him intimately aware of agriculture in developing countries as well as the challenges of working with people from differing cultures. He also developed and coordinated an industry oriented export conference several years ago. Dr. Weidman, as a faculty member at a public institution, is the "public" in the private-public partnership.

Ms. Bryant is African-American, Mr. T is Chinese-American, and Dr. Weidman is a Euro-American. As the ethnic diversity of the country, especially in the state of California, continues to expand, Sino-US represents the present and the future of the country. (In addition, it makes the team an unforgettable combination so that people with whom the team has contact easily remember it.)

Project Origins

The first steps were initiated with the development of a program by Mr. T and Ms. Bryant to bring Chinese delegations to the United States for three to five days on a university campus and then to visit agribusinesses throughout California and the country. Beijing (the central government) had been sending delegations to the U.S. to expose them to agriculture here to stimulate ideas for their own agricultural development. However Beijing was disappointed to some extent in the results because the delegations were not learning as much as the government had hoped. Mr. T, added to this basic concept seminars at a university to enhance the learning experience. Because Cal Poly Pomona is only one of the two universities in the area with a college of agriculture, Ms. Bryant contacted the university. The principle author has extensive international experience and a meeting was arranged between the three. Several training programs with different agricultural commodity orientations, consisting of a series of seminars, were developed. This step though led to the concept of training, a key item in the current project.

The next step occurred when one of the members of the MBOC International Subcommittee, who had business interests in one of China's Northeast provinces, approached Ms. Bryant about an integrated cattle-meat products project proposed for the province. Because of the lack of technical expertise and financial capacity, the provincial officials were interested in establishing joint venture relationships with U.S. firms to undertake the project. Ms. Bryant contacted the principal author to set up a meeting. The three outlined a methodology. It included the development of the Corporate Interactive Program, discussed below, which was to become the cornerstone of the current project. Personal and business differences led to the discontinuance of this undertaking. Ms. Bryant and the author worked without funding for three years refining the concept.

The third step occurred when Ms. Bryant attended an international trade conference. At the conclusion she approached one of the presenters, then head of the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS), about the project. He immediately suggested submitting a proposal to FAS' Emerging Markets Program. We submitted a proposal covering a year to complete the entire project. The committee reviewing the proposal recommended funding but only if the project were divided into smaller segments and funding requested for each segment after the completion of the earlier ones. The team did so and the first phase was funded. Sino-US also received additional funding from the state of California's Agricultural Research Initiative, which funds applied research by non-land grant university agricultural faculty.

Government Funding

The writing of these proposals not only provided funding, but also assisted the team in developing its mission and methodology. Government funding also has advantages in marketing the program: 1) government involvement provides credibility and opens doors for the program both in China and with U.S. agribusiness firms, and 2) both Chinese and U.S. agribusiness firms are reluctant to provide funding for a project, institution or businesses with which they are not familiar. Once the project has established a reputation and credibility, government money can be phased out.

The Project

The goal of this project is to bridge the large gaps currently existing between the Chinese demand and the U.S. supply of agricultural products. By creating special market niches and using the Corporate Interactive Program, to facilitate trade and investment, sales of U.S. agricultural products to China will expand step by step.

The project objectives are:

1. Provide a more in-depth corn products and cattle input market assessment in Northeast China.
2. Identify and involve U.S. agribusiness companies who can and are willing to supply those markets.
3. Use training to provide both market information and to facilitate relationship building between U.S. agricultural firms and Chinese officials and entrepreneurs in order to create business alliances.
4. Develop an operational and feedback system so that this alliance/network will function and grow.

Corporate Interactive Program

The Corporate Interactive Program has been created as the key tool to involve both U.S. agricultural firms - small, medium and major, and the Chinese partners in training/seminars. Market niche development and training would take place both at Cal Poly Pomona and at the sites of the agribusiness participating in the Corporate Interactive Program, and would provide

1. Market/product information;
2. Relationship building; and
3. Business awareness and alliance initiation.

The program provides "hands on" activities and an opportunity to expose products and services to interested Chinese delegations. The training is the neutral ground where U.S. and China can meet to overcome the difference and discover the similarities of "doing business". This program becomes an asset to both sides to dissolve misconceptions and cultural misunderstandings.

The team initiated "quanxi", which is very important in Chinese culture, in its assessment trip to China (below). Quanxi is the development of personal contacts on which one builds

reciprocal relationships. This is essential for doing business in China. The training/workshops also provide a common ground where American companies and Chinese can meet to build on this *quanxi*. From this they can develop long-run trading and investment relationships. The project can serve as model that can be applied to other commodities and emerging market countries.

Problems Addressed

The problems addressed are:

1. Insufficient knowledge, sometimes ignorance, of Chinese food and agricultural markets by U.S. agribusiness firms;
2. Lack of knowledge, sometimes ill informed market information by potential Chinese customers on specific products and services offered by U.S. agribusinesses;
3. Cultural and interpersonal differences, especially in doing business;
4. Lack of a forum for Chinese officials and U.S. agribusiness firms to meet;
5. Insufficient understanding by officials of their needs in agriculture.

Project Methodology

Achieving Objective 1: The team visited Northeast China to meet provincial officials to promote the project, to assess with the Chinese the potential corn products and cattle inputs market, and to initiate the relationship building (*quanxi*). The region's geography as well as economic and political status were also assessed. This facilitates the development of the training program (3. below) and channels of communication between the team, the PRC and the U.S. agribusiness firms.

The team undertook preliminary market research on China using its contacts in China and secondary sources (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 1997; China Action Team, 1997; Country Commercial Guide, 1998; ERS, 1998; FAS, 1998). The Chinese indicated one of their main interests was corn products. Because of the previous work done on the potential integrated cattle-meat products project in Jilin province and the verification of the potential through secondary sources, cattle raising was also selected.

The project team traveled to Northeast China in November 1999. Through contacts (*quanxi*) of one of the team members, the team met with governors, mayors, provincial agricultural officers, a cattle breeding facility, experiment stations that included corn breeding, and private enterprises to discuss their needs. The discussions confirmed the original assessment that opportunities existed in cattle breeding materials and corn products.

The Central government in China has designated Northeastern China as one of the prime areas for future development of its cattle industry. Jilin province, for example, plans to increase the total amount of cattle from 7.97 million to 13 million head. The seven to eight per cent per year growth of the Chinese economy in this decade has increased the demand for meat. Furthermore, when China enters the WTO and reduces its corn import barriers, the chief cattle feed in the Northeast, it is expected that animal production will expand even more. Sino-US also found that currently the market is dominated by Canadians who are selling "continental breeds": Simmental, Limousin, and Charolais. SUSAA realized that California could find a niche market in Northeast China by differentiating the market by promoting a meat breed. After

consultation with faculty from Cal Poly Pomona's Animal and Veterinarian Sciences Department, SUSAA decided on Angus cattle. Further consultation with a member of California's Angus industry and with a delegation of Chinese officials from the area we had visited confirmed a possible market niche in China. High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS) was selected as the processed corn product to introduce to the Chinese market.

In the original plan the team was to 1) travel to China to assess their needs/market niches, and the 2) contact U.S. agribusinesses interested in trade and/or joint ventures. During the trip we found that the Chinese had difficulty defining specific needs. This necessitated revising the approach: 1) travel to China, 2) needs not specified so market needs to be developed: 2a) contact U.S. agribusinesses for product and price information, 2b) use the China and U.S. agribusiness information as well as secondary sources to write a marketing report for the Chinese officials, 2c) submit the report to the Chinese for comments and recommendations, 3) the Chinese reply, and 4) then recontact U.S. agribusinesses to find those interested in working in China (in objective 2 in the initial plan). The Chinese officials will also utilize the marketing report to request funds from their central government to purchase U.S. export products. The marketing reports (Weidman, et al., August 2000, September 2000, April 2001; Mr. T, et al., 2000) were instrumental in creating greater interest in the product lines.

Achieving Objective 2: Developed a database of firms in the cattle breeding materials and HFCS for contacting potential agribusiness suppliers.

In order to find potential American suppliers of Black Angus breeding materials (embryos, semen, breeding stock) we contacted one of the vice presidents of the 26,000 member American Angus Association. Because of this vast membership, we asked for suggestions to reduce the potential volume of contacts. He said that he could not recommend one breeder over another, but did suggest limiting ourselves to one region. Because we are operating out of California, he thought the West would be appropriate. According to the Chinese phytosanitary standards, because of the presence of blue tongue disease, only embryos can be exported from the western states to China. As per their suggestion, Sino-US used the association's trade publication *Angus Journal* to compile a database of Black Angus breeders. The Red Angus Association of America's informational materials were similarly used for that industry. HFCS producers were found through the trade publication **Food Processing** and the Corn Refiners Association.

- Identified firms interested in membership in the Corporate Interactive Program and implemented a system of communication with them. This was accomplished through letters and phone calls.
- Conducted market analyses of the Chinese beef cattle and corn industries for U.S. agribusiness companies for that will participate in the Corporate Interactive Program (Weidman, et al., August 2000, September 2000 based on Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 1997; China Action Plan Team, 1997; Colby et al., 2000; Country Commercial Guide, 1998; Crook, 2000; ERS, August 1998; ERS, 2000; Fang, et al., 2000; FAS, 2000; "Leading Sectors...", 2000; Tian and Chudleigh, 1999).
- Planning & Coordination—Sino-US visited U.S. agribusiness firms participating in the Corporate Interactive Program to initiate the business relationship and to assess their interest and capability for participating,

One of the Black Angus breeders hosted us and set up appointments for us with eight breeders at the Western Angus Association's annual meeting and livestock show in Reno, Nevada. The 30 to 45 minute discussion with each included an overview of our program, our interest in meeting with Angus breeders, and queries as to their ranch size, the breeds of cattle and head of each, and the number of embryos that could be provided within a six month period. Our discussion emphasized that our program interest was not short-term, but to establish a long-term relationship that could develop over the years. Later the Sino-US team traveled to the Sacramento, California area and visited Angus ranchers. This provided an opportunity to see the operations first hand to further assess their operations and interest. The meetings in Reno and ranch visits were successful in creating participation in the project. The team also met with top executives at the corporate executive offices of four major corn processors that produce HFCS in the Midwest: Cargill International, Archer Daniels Midland, Corn Products International, and A.E. Staley MFG.

Achieving Objective 3: Develop training curriculum for a mission of participating Chinese at Cal Poly Pomona. The "hands-on" training will include lecture/discussions and field trips to relevant agribusiness firms in Southern California to observe their operations. (There are numerous food and agricultural firms within two to three hours of the university.)

The purpose of the training is to 1) facilitate the Chinese technical and business discussions with the participating agribusiness firms and 2) to build business relationships ("quanxi"). Its objectives are to 1) to increase the Chinese partners' understanding of U.S. agriculture to facilitate discussion with Corporate Interactive Corporate Program (The U.S. agricultural system is very different from that of China, a developing country, and a basic knowledge of the former will enhance the Chinese' understanding of U.S. products and services.), 2) improve PRC partners' understanding of U.S. business culture to enhance their interactions with U.S. managers, 3) understand what U.S. food and agribusiness companies seek in exporting and investing in China, and 4) continue building the quanxi that began with the project team's visit to Northeast China. The rationale for the purpose and objectives was presented above under Corporate Interactive Program.

The next step is to develop an itinerary for the mission of PRC officials to meet with interested agribusiness firms. The mission of Chinese partners will travel to the headquarters (or another appropriate regional office) of agribusiness firms in the Interactive Corporate Program. Each company will offer a seminar/training, at its expense, on the products and services it provides and on what it expects from trade/investment partners. These seminars (part of the project cost-sharing) provide face-to-face meetings between the Chinese mission and company management .

Objective 4: Develop an operational system. All activities will be monitored and analyzed by creating a data base that can constantly be updated from feedback before, during and after the training program.

Sino-US has just completed the activities to finish objective 2. It will undertake 3 and 4 in the next phase.

Challenges/Lessons Learned

Data Constraints

Statistical data on corn products and cattle breeding materials is very limited. The USDA and international agencies such as the World Bank and the United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organization provide extensive statistics and analysis on agricultural commodities such as grains, including corn, and cattle raising, but not on the products covered in this proposal, which are one or two stages removed from the "farm". Internet searches use of general and agricultural specific search engines ("Searchag" and "Agdomain" for example) reached the same conclusion.

The team developed and distributed a questionnaire to collect statistical data from provincial and local officials. However there were numerous inconsistencies in the data.

Phytosanitary Standards

When the Chinese first requested a product, Sino-US assumed that, because they had made the request, that there were not any restrictions on its entry, or that they are aware of such restrictions. While in China several officials expressed an interest in acquiring specialty corn seeds such as high oleic, high starch, and waxy corn. After returning home, Sino-US began contacting U.S. seed companies. The team discovered by contacting the local USDA office that Chinese phytosanitary regulations prohibited the import of corn seeds. Therefore we had to abandon the effort. (According to the U.S.-China WTO entry agreement, a joint American-Chinese committee will analyze this restriction and make recommendations.)

One U.S. cattle exporter on the east coast had ceased exporting to China because of the difficulties in doing so. He also informed us that, according to the Chinese phytosanitary standards, the Chinese could send a team of cattle specialists to insure that the standards were being met and to help in the selection of breeding materials. The cost of their travel, lodging and entertainment was the responsibility of the U.S. side.

Angus Cattle

Another problem was discovered while Mr. T was in China. Color is very important in Chinese culture. The color black represents death and some Chinese officials have problems with Black Angus cattle, so the team decided to substitute the "Red Angus". This was discovered when the official with whom we were working forwarded our program to the Central Government. This had not been mentioned in our trip to China last year or in later discussions with local/provincial officials. The Black Angus is very popular in the United States but the Red ones are very similar in characteristics except for color. Another contact in China who is raising cattle said that he has not had any problems marketing black ones, so the color restriction might be confined to one area. Sino-US is working with both Red and Black Angus breeders in case black is not a problem in other areas.

Modification in Approach

As previously mentioned according to the original plan the team was to 1) travel to China to assess their needs/market niches, and the 2) contact U.S. agribusinesses interested in trade and/or joint ventures. During the trip we found that they had difficulty defining specific needs. This necessitated revising the approach: 1) travel to China, 2) needs not specified so market needs to be developed: 2a) contact U.S. agribusinesses for product and price

information, 2b) use the China and U.S. agribusiness information as well as secondary sources to write a marketing report for the Chinese officials, 2c) submit the report to the Chinese for comments and recommendations, 3) the Chinese reply, and 4) then recontact U.S. agribusinesses to find those interested in working in China (in objective 2 in the initial plan).

This is not that unusual in this type of endeavor. The principal author has been a party to several discussions on campus between representatives from developing countries and Cal Poly Pomona faculty to explore possible working arrangements. However the former know that they need assistance in a certain area, for example cattle raising, but do not have enough knowledge to know what their specific needs are. The Cal Poly Pomona side is interested, but initially frustrated because the other party is not specific enough for the Cal Poly Pomona personnel to know what to provide them. The way to overcome this divide and reduce the frustration is constant dialogue between the two until specific needs are defined. It is, in other words, an interactive process.

Summary

The article presented a methodology to develop agricultural market niches to expand U.S. agricultural trade and investment in Northeast China. The Corporate Interactive Program, a key component, utilizes training workshops, both at Cal Poly and at agribusiness sites, to provide market information and build business relationships, "quanxi", between Chinese officials and entrepreneurs as well as U.S., including California, agribusinesses. Quanxi is a cultural key to successful business in China. Because such undertakings are not a stochastic process, but a function of the talents and skills of those involved, the background of the three members of SINO-U.S. Agricultural Alliances and the origins of the project/research are presented.

Final Note

Cal Poly Pomona is an educational institution and its involvement has another advantage. In an economy and food and agricultural system that is becoming more international, is imperative that the University and the College of Agriculture increase its international involvements. This will increase faculty and students' exposure to the people and food and agricultural systems of other countries. Finally, it will increase the university's ability to assist U.S. food and agribusiness firms expand export sales and foreign investments.

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