

Stockwell International as a company, and I imagine along with a lot of other small to medium freight forwarders, have experienced some of the toughest market conditions in its 42 years. These prevailing market conditions have forced a divide between loyal customers who rely on a personal service and those looking to lean up their supply chains at any cost; even if by the smallest of margins.

Higher ocean and airfreight rates have squeezed out smaller freight forwarders to the multinationals who have stronger buying power. Enabling them to maintain their monopoly over the higher volume movers. Shipping lines in partnership with the multinationals offer slightly lower rates ensuring we cannot compete on the same business.

Add to this, current world events such as a weakening economy in China, a recovering USA and a stagnant Europe, it led Stockwell's to reinvent their services to fall in line with these changing economies. The need for integrated logistics and ultimately a deeper understanding of what our clients were trying to achieve in the long term, meant a more diversified approach to our service offering was required.

We implemented a complete customer service strategy in line with nothing we have ever done before, employing additional staff to implement this strategy rather than lean out our staff in difficult times. Our board felt it was not time to simply react to challenges in China and across the globe but to allow our partners and our clients to capitalise and learn from them. If we were to see out these challenges we indeed needed to move forward through them with solutions.

China's increasing wages costs to manufacture have worried some of our clients more recently. China seems to be increasing wages but standards of manufacture is frightfully unchanged. We sought to find alternative trade lanes for our commodity and garment clients, while remaining focused on providing factories with high integrity to their own staff, with quality manufactured goods. This meant exploiting markets in Vietnam and Cambodia to name a few. Where it was not feasible to change trade lanes we worked on alternative factories that allowed greater control on Quality and with current suppliers to allow for the building of customised and personalised FAKs to save across the supply chain. We have worked on consolidating in China for multiple suppliers for direct into store shipments or across trade lanes where feasible.

All solutions are met with their own challenges but as Stockwells have grown and diversified we have become a supply chain partner rather than just a freight forwarder, customs broker or distributor. We offer IT integration; sign on glass and SMS messaging in line with the rise of social media and the need for instant accessibility of information, just as our competitors, the multinationals do. We are not content to sit in their shadow but to outshine them in all things customer service; because unlike them our clients are GOLD to us and they treated as such, it is not a numbers game but a partnership. Of course we are not infallible or even near perfect, but we respect who it is keeping us in business.

Our customer service strategy and tailored solutions is starting to win back the larger volume customer and it is always good to hear "that sometime it's not always about the cost, it's about the package" come from the mouth of a client returning from a multinational.