

‘Business as usual’ and ‘let’s see what happens’

When this column appears, I will be in China. Next week I will be in South Korea and Japan. And shortly after I leave Japan, Mark Rutte will be arriving there on 9 November for a trade mission.

In China, I shall be presenting a strategic vision of the development of an area of 122 km<sup>2</sup> within Beijing’s sixth ring road, on behalf of Holland Center China, a group of cooperating businesses and leading sectors. The client is CDO, a subsidiary of the China Development Bank. CDO is the largest real estate bank in China, and probably the world.

CDO has an ambitious outlook, inspired by the speeches of President Xi Jinping, who believes it is important that cities should develop in a green, circular and ‘low carbon’ manner. That fits in well with the ambition of the Netherlands to be the ‘greenest city in the world’, which I wrote about in my column of 3 October.

The Dutch government and the Dutch business world tend to approach this kind of potential customer with our standard ‘business as usual’ and ‘let’s see what happens’ attitude. Recently, I once again saw that this approach does not always display the correct business development mindset. The time of simple ‘trading’ is over.

This attitude means that we are missing out on a lot of opportunities. On the other hand, the King and Queen do an enormous amount of good work for our country. Although I did not take part in the trade mission, I was able to witness their visit to China at close range. With their international presence and their interest, they are of inestimable value. The benefit of not having too much changes at the top is the same for a country as it is for a company. Doing business is based on building relationships and trust. That transcends party politics. A large potential customer wants to be given the right amount of attention. And if that doesn’t happen in the Netherlands, they will look for it from our neighbours.

Building relationships is also about knowing and appreciating the culture. If major projects in China require the attention of senior Chinese officials in order to speed things up in a bureaucratic country, it is useful to respond to that at the right time. And that can only be achieved by a high-level visit from our side.

But building relationships also means following up on intentions. Of course, it may very well be the case that you put a lot of energy in nine times, but do not win a project until the tenth time. Having this first reference project is very important for expanding your company, but also for building your brand. The potential CDO project in Beijing is therefore a

wonderful opportunity for integrated solutions from the Netherlands. It is all about smart mobility, reusing wastewater, renewable energy, green neighbourhoods, caring for the elderly and local food production.

Building your brand thus means making choices and being consistent. And even that does not always go well. While here in the Netherlands we are again firing up the coal-fired power stations because they are cheaper than gas, Beijing is transforming its power stations from coal to gas, even if it leads to higher energy prices. That, incidentally, is a great incentive for saving more energy – which is good for new products and services, and thus for innovation! It is a question of which areas a government chooses to prioritise.

It is important that we as a country know where the opportunities lie and what our customers want. The key is to develop and connect markets.

It is time for a ‘Ministry of Marketing and Business Development’.