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Albina Pen

A matter close to her heart

“One thing leads to another” is one of Niccolò Machiavelli’s countless surviving quotes. A statement that the Florentine philosopher, politician, diplomat, chronicler, writer and poet could have alluded to Albina Pen, had he not lived 500 years before her. “One thing leads to another”, however, fits perfectly with the life story of the co-founder and managing director of Dragon Gifts.



The success of this Russian woman in the promotional product industry has evolved over the years. When she was still at school, she was expected to have a career as a teacher or a journalist. In fact, at the age of 15, Albina Pen earned her first money writing articles in the regional press. Her ability to explain things well and to put them in a nutshell may have contributed to her enrolling in the theatre faculty after school and being trained as a special events manager. Another important factor was her desire to exploit her creative potential. But she did not want to rely on that alone. During her studies, she also completed business courses. “I sought a broad education – in art and culture as well as in economic matters. I had to learn where my strengths and weaknesses lie and how I can improve. It has always been a trade-off between what I wanted and what I had”, says the mother-of-two when describing her (professional) beginnings.

Headfirst into a new life

If you want to understand how and why Albina Pen has become a successful promotional product professional, you need to take a closer look at her career. The roots of the 38-year-old lie in Blagoveshchensk, near the Chinese border. Its geographical proximity to China eventually led to her taking on a job with a Taiwanese company in southern China specialising in the manufacture of mobile phone accessories. Looking back at this time, Albina Pen says today: “I rushed headlong into this completely new life for me. I spent most of the time in production to get to know all the steps of good work. At the same time, I had to learn Mandarin.” With a wink, she adds: “And in all honesty, that is not exactly the simplest language.” The advantage of this phase of her life: She learned something new every day. “Chinese culture, the mental attitude of the Chinese

and their way of doing business. That was quite difficult, but it paid off and enabled me to start my own business.”

At the beginning were mobile phone accessories

Albina Pen and her husband Denis laid the foundation for their own business in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou. “Back then, we were among the few non-Chinese people to live there,” recalls the native Russian. “Chinese chocolate was salty. The bread was sweet. But despite all the differences, we found out very quickly that we also have something in common with the city. We fell in love with Guangzhou and could not imagine a better place to start our own business. We started with telephone accessories and logistics services. That was the birth of Gain Dragon. When we saw the good growth prospects, we continued to develop new services that initially became separate business units and later independent companies with legal independence and their own employees.” That is how Dragon Gifts evolved, for which she now works exclusively and is responsible.

No sign of weariness

When dealing with mobile phone accessories on a daily basis, Albina Pen realised very quickly that some of them were suitable as giftware. With lightning speed, more and more phones and gadgets came on the market. Some of them were much more than just accessories. The creative businesswoman realised very quickly: When branded and personalised as well as individually packaged, they became new articles. “After attending the Canton Trade Fair and the Hong Kong Gifts & Premium Fair for the first time, I realised that I could expand my product range. So, I entered the promotional product industry and found what I was always looking for: a sector where I could develop my full creative potential.” Albina Pen sees the special advantage of the promotional product industry in the enormous selection of products. “The products are so diverse that it is simply impossible to get bored,” enthuses Albina Pen. “I work with so many different people that new horizons open up with every project. When I worked for BMW and Toyota, I learned a lot about automobiles. When I prepare an offer for a pharmaceutical company or a wine shop, I immerse myself in their peculiarities.” Her work is never monotonous and therefore the 38-year-old cannot imagine ever getting tired of the industry.

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ALBINA PEN IN PERSON

What was your first thought this morning?

I thought of new coffee blends my clients brought me from the Dominican Republic, I couldn't wait to taste them. I can't imagine my morning without coffee.

When is your day a good one?

A busy day at work when everything planned is accomplished.

What gets you in a good mood?

Many things actually, I try to appreciate every moment of life as it's truly beautiful. Even just a bright sunny day or good music can improve my mood immediately.

And what drives you crazy?

People who can't keep their promises.

What are you most likely to forgive yourself about?

An extra cake or a late hearty dinner that will cost me additional time at a tennis court or in a swimming pool.

When do you lose track of time?

When I spend time with my children or work at an engrossing project.

If you were forced to take a four-week holiday, where would you go?

I would choose a trip to South or North America. It's great to discover new places.

What do you like spending your money on?

I love to buy things for my kids, I try to give them everything I didn't have when I was a child.

Do you let yourself get seduced by advertisements?

Absolutely yes, but only by high profile ones. I don't like cheap, intrusive advertisements.

When is a promotional product a good promotional product?

A good promotional product should be useful, functional and evoke positive response from its recipient.

What is the best promotional product you have ever received?

I got a power blade from my Chinese business partner. Soon that product won hearts and minds of our Russian and European customers. In 2017, it became a winner in PSI FIRST.

What do you find irritating in relation to promotional products?

I find it irritating when people don't try to broaden their product line and constantly order the same small variety of goods for every occasion. We specialize in individual approach to every promotional campaign and offer different assortment range for every event.



>> Professionals, but not magicians

Despite her enthusiasm, she also knows the difficult aspects. And, above all, she thinks of the occasional weakness on the part of the customer when it comes to planning ahead. "Customers ask for products at a certain point in time, but sometimes they do not give us time to produce quality items and deliver accordingly. We are all true professionals, but not magicians." In this context, Albina Pen lists several attributes of Dragon Gifts that she believes make her company unique in the international promotional product industry. "Our uniqueness lies in our truly extensive range. Over the years, we have built solid busi-



The promotional products of Albina Pen and Dragon Gifts meet the taste of the customers. In 2017, the company won the PSI FIRST Award (Albina Pen and Michael Freter, Managing Director PSI).

ness relations and concluded exclusive contracts with leading manufacturers. We can literally make any product – from the simple to the high-end version. As our head office is in China, we can offer our customers competitive pricing, quality control on every order, and trouble-free supply. Our Guangzhou office has a large team of Chinese and Russian professionals who all speak two to three languages. This is a key advantage," says Albina Pen when elaborately and passionately describing the advantages of her company. Not without pride, she immediately adds Dragon Gifts' greatest achievements: "We produce licensed products for international sporting events."

Bright innovative future

Moreover, she is very proud of her Moscow office: "Although I opened it only three years ago, I have managed to build a professional, close-knit team." Last but not least, she attaches great importance to sustainable success. "I would like to see three key aspects inextricably linked to Dragon Gifts: High-end products that are safe and environmentally friendly." Therein lies what Albina Pen calls the "bright innovative" future of the promotional product industry. The products of tomorrow must meet safety and environmental criteria. At the same time, they will always become more technology-oriented due to the evolving developments." For the open-minded businesswoman, this is certainly a development with a lot of growth potential which "can positively change the promotional product industry."

Building a bridge

When Albina Pen talks about Dragon Gifts, she does so with great passion. It quickly becomes clear that for her it is more than just a company. "Dragon Gifts is my creation, my idea. It's an integral part of my life, a matter close to my heart." And she still has many plans to move her business forward. "I'm very much a perfectionist. My motto is: rather a little less but close to perfection than more but half-hearted." Albina Pen wants to build a bridge between Europe and China with Dragon Gifts. That is one of the reasons why Dragon Gifts has become a PSI member. The fact that the company has become increasingly attractive to customers who want to work with Chinese companies has encouraged them to intensify the bridge-building. "Working with Chinese business people harbours pitfalls," says Albina Pen. "You simply have to exercise caution when choosing partners who produce high-quality products according to customer requirements."

Most important mission of all

Despite her professional ambitions, the mother-of-two has a much more important private ambition: "I want to educate my two children into happy, decent people and give them an excellent education. My daughter and my son should learn how to find their way around and be able to adapt to a variety of situations without giving up their dreams. I really hope I succeed." <