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“An industry under pressure has much more momentum”

Inga Wiens (36) is Regional Sales Manager at Muller Martini and responsible for the Greater China/China, Taiwan and South Korea region. In this blog, the sinologist talks about her experiences in the Chinese printing market, her experiences as a woman in the male-dominated graphic arts industry and the impact of the corona pandemic on her professional day-to-day life.

I ended up in the graphics industry via two detours – an apprenticeship in another industry and a degree course that also had nothing to do with machines. Born and raised in Bielefeld, I completed a bank apprenticeship there after doing my school leaving and university entry certificate. Although being a tax officer was my dream job in my childhood, I soon realized that my professional future did not lie in the financial industry.

So I went to university to study [sinology](#) in Münster (where I did my bachelor’s degree) and then to Hamburg (where I graduated with a master’s degree). I also did two semesters of my studies abroad in the two capitals of Beijing (China) and Taipei (Taiwan), where I was able to benefit enormously and improve my language skills.

There were two reasons why I opted for Chinese studies. On the one hand, I always really liked languages and had a great interest in foreign cultures. On the other hand, my father, who worked in the automotive industry, was regularly away on assembly jobs in China, and always told me exciting things about the country, and that awakened my interest in this fascinating place.

I was looking for a B2B job with lots of customer contact

Although, a scientific career would also have been open to me after graduating from university, that did not appeal to me. In fact, I was looking for a professional challenge where I could combine my studies and the business management knowledge I'd acquired in my banking apprenticeship. That's why I focused my search on a B2B role with lots of customer contacts and started my first job with Kolbus in Rahden in 2014.

After two years as a trainee, I joined the back office and was responsible for China there. Not only was I in charge of customer projects but together with a colleague from Marketing, I was also de facto co-project manager for the most important trade fairs in China – including the [China Print in Beijing](#), which takes place every four years, and the biennial All In Print China in [Shanghai](#), where I was also at the booth for the entire duration of the fair. In addition, I regularly wrote articles for the website of the Asian Kolbus representation, which I created and maintained, and designed the video channel for the Chinese YouTube counterpart [Youku](#).

From Kolbus to Muller Martini: A smooth transition

After Muller Martini's takeover of the perfect binder and bookline business of Kolbus two years ago, my job title changed. Now my business card says Regional Sales Manager Greater China/China, Taiwan and South Korea. As far as my professional activities are concerned, however, little has changed. I still look after the same Chinese customers – even though (I'm thinking, in particular, of saddle stitching and Finishing 4.0 solutions) the machine portfolio has become more extensive and I work with new colleagues from Muller Martini in China.

I experienced the transition from Kolbus to Muller Martini as very smooth, and I felt welcome at my new employer from day one. It goes without saying that there were new challenges at the beginning. For instance, I had to even out problems with some Chinese customers who, as long-time Kolbus users, were initially somewhat skeptical about the deal – which I managed quite well, since they had known me for years. At Muller Martini, I also had to get used to new contact persons and new processes (layouts/ERP system) that are more defined and standardized than at Kolbus.

This was all the easier for me because Kolbus and Muller Martini, as family businesses, have a similar corporate philosophy with a pleasant working atmosphere and collegiality, as well as flat hierarchical structures, which – in contrast to a bank, for example – offer employees a great deal of influence and opportunities to help shape the company.

Every customer has their own business model

Because Muller Martini in China had a broader portfolio than Kolbus, my customer base suddenly expanded significantly. And with it also my travel activities – an aspect of my profession that I particularly enjoy. In normal years, I fly to China every two/three months. I find it extremely exciting to work face to face with customers on site to design a project. Talking about new machine investments at the table has become increasingly important because nowadays every customer has their own business model and smart factories are becoming increasingly important in China as well.

The fact that I speak Chinese fluently and that we do not have to laboriously translate through a third person naturally simplifies and speeds up discussions about technical details. The customers immediately develop trust and thus involve me more closely in their plans and projects. And this also promotes partnership beyond the purely business aspect, since social components such as eating together in China are just as important as formal discussions.

In China, there are many women in top positions

Chinese customers don't have the slightest reservation about discussing machine matters with a woman. After all, it's not unusual in China for women to occupy top positions in large graphics companies. China is very advanced in this respect...

...and differs markedly from other latitudes, where many printing and finishing companies are still a male bastion. By the way, it's exactly the same at Muller Martini, where I'm the only woman far and wide in my position. Even at my first drupa in 2016, I noticed during a detour to the Muller Martini booth that the Muller Martini world is predominantly male – while at Kolbus there were considerably more women. In the meantime, however, I've realized through experience and concrete inquiries that this has grown organically at Muller Martini and that there are no reservations whatsoever against women even in management positions. Even today, large machines are still associated with men – even though a lot is being done in the graphics industry to promote women.

The corona pandemic gave us new ideas

Whether women or men: There is one thing we are all equally affected by in this memorable year. The corona pandemic has had and is still having a great impact on me. In 2020, for example, I have not yet been on one single business trip, have been affected by short-time work for the first time in my professional career and, like many of my colleagues, am still working from home. Our sales staff in China have been able to resume several projects that had been blocked due to the lockdown and to complete some of them. My personal customer contacts are currently limited to WeChat, Skype, phone and email.

At least the extraordinary emergency situation gave us completely new ideas. For example, we successfully offered a customer in the Taiwanese city of New Taipei City a live video demonstration of our [KM 610.A perfect binder](#) from the Rahden plant with four different products and three changeover procedures. Originally, the customer wanted to look at the machine in our Blue Salon, but this was not possible due to travel restrictions.

The adventure with mobile phone camera, selfie stick and a single test run the day before was a resounding success. Only a few weeks after the demo, during which everything went smoothly except for a short interruption of the internet connection, the customer signed the [purchase contract for the extensive softcover line](#).

In addition, the customer gave us a few tips for further online demos. For me, this machine sale was an excellent example of how we are able to maintain services for our customers during this difficult situation despite the travel ban. It was a nice story in not such a nice time. And it was also proof of the trust that our customers place in Muller Martini systems.

Online modules cannot replace drupa

On the other hand, the postponement of drupa until next year was a severe blow for all of us. In 2016, numerous large groups from China came to Düsseldorf. For my market, in particular, I consider drupa – despite the two major graphic arts trade fairs in China – to be indispensable. It cannot be replaced even by the most innovative online modules. I meet customers at drupa who I cannot visit during my trips to China because of the size of the country. I therefore hope that drupa 2021 will take place.

Even though the corona crisis will leave deep scars and there will be further restructuring in our industry, I have no doubt that print products have a future – not least against the background of the current discussions about the negative consequences of reading in electronic media too frequently. The graphics industry will remain under pressure. But I'm optimistic: an

industry under pressure has much more momentum. I'm thinking, for example, of personalized products and the on-demand trend – business areas in which Muller Martini is a leader with its Finishing 4.0 solutions.

My heart continues to beat for print

Whether in my professional or in my private life: my heart certainly continues to beat for print. Of course, I also consume current news mainly in electronic media. But I read magazines, fiction and novels exclusively in hard copy form. After a long day at a computer, I find it reassuring to have a print product in my hands. And there's nothing more inspiring for me than browsing through a printed cookbook to prepare a tasty meal.

Your

Inga Wiens, Regional Sales Manager Greater China Muller Martini