

A globetrotting career

By Ian Mundell

27.05.2010 / 04:10 CET

Dan Baxter on bringing public affairs to Asia and back again.

It was as a student in his native Toronto that Dan Baxter first thought of a career in public affairs. "I got involved in politics during university and spent some time working on political campaigns, both internal to the [Conservative] party and external. After working for a couple of candidates, more senior politicians, it seemed a natural move to go into the agency side."

The fact that his degree was in business affairs was an advantage. He says he finds that politics is more influenced by marketing than by the political science he studied at university.

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He joined GPC in Toronto, and after a couple of years was offered a posting in Brussels. Shortly after he arrived in 2000, the company merged with international public relations agency Fleishman Hillard. It was under this banner that he spent the next seven years, working on everything from environmental policy and air-traffic control to merger cases.

It is a job that satisfies his curiosity. "The skills that you learn in agency life can be applied across different sectors, companies and cultures," he says, "so you can be useful to your clients but at the same time continually learn new things."

Indian adventure

Independent of his work, Baxter had also developed an interest in India, following a trip to the country. When Fleishman Hillard opened an office in Mumbai, he leapt at the chance to work there. His task was to help position the new business and secure clients.

"It's helping Indian companies go international. In some cases, it's helping Indian companies have a more formal communications discipline. What we do in this industry is quite new to India," he says. "And it's also helping international companies who come to India to understand how the system works."

It was an adjustment that Baxter had to go through himself. "The first thing that you have to do is get to grips with the numbers," he says. "When you are dealing with a society of 1.2 billion people, rampant poverty, a large population of illiterate people and of people without access to television, you have to learn different ways of operating."

The mix of old and new in Indian society also has to be negotiated. "When you are walking around you see ancient society meet absolute modernity, and everything in between. Things change by the day."

Despite his attachment to the country, Baxter wasn't allowed to settle in India. Fleishman Hillard moved him on after 15 months. "It was enough time to do the job I was sent there to do, and I'm very happy with the result, but I still love the country. It's an absolutely fascinating place."

Beijing to Brussels

His next stop was China, where his task was to develop public affairs at the Beijing office, one of three that the company has in China. This time the remit was tougher. "The reality is that public affairs in Beijing needs to be done by Chinese people, and preferably Chinese people who are politically connected," he says.

After nine months in China, Baxter was brought back to Brussels, at the beginning of 2010. His task is now to help manage Fleishman Hillard's expanding presence in Brussels. The Asian experience has proved valuable, particularly the different ways that India and China are embracing digital technologies. "It turns out we are doing a lot of digital things here [in Brussels]," he says. "One of the benefits here is that, because the clients are more comfortable with public affairs as a notion, in some ways they are more willing to try new things, even if societies are less quick to adapt."

Connecting clients in Asia to Brussels is not high on the agenda, yet. "It took European companies some time to understand the importance of Brussels, and it sometimes took some pain as well. Asian companies, when they operate in Europe, will come up against that, and at that point they will realise the need to do something in Brussels."

Ian Mundell is a freelance journalist based in Brussels.