

Features

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Direct to the Source

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We always talk about telling the story of your products and creating lasting relationships with the vendors who produce the goods you're selling. For Heather Smith at Molbak's in Seattle, traveling overseas to buy directly from manufacturers allowed her to do exactly that.

I asked her recently about the biggest benefits to her trip overseas with Glenhaven Home & Holiday, a company created by longtime gift and garden veteran Tom Durkin. "Margin increases and our ability to tailor product specifications to accommodate our business and our customers," she says of those benefits.

"Meeting the people who design and create these items really help us tell the story in our store.

"And I feel very fortunate to have been able to experience many new cultures and see many places of the world that I normally would not have."

Pictured: It's not all work—retailers also tour sites like the Great Wall of China and the Taj Mahal in India, pictured [here](#).

Add one more benefit to buying direct: Heather says by placing orders ahead of domestic wholesalers, she's able to receive seasonal product one to two months before domestic orders.

A Tailor-Made Experience

Tom, who started out at one of those gifting wholesalers and spent years living in Asia, started his business when customers began asking to go directly to the source. Through Glenhaven Home & Holiday, he facilitates all the travel for holiday-buying trips that happen in mid-September through the end of October for the next holiday season (so this September-October to buy for the winter holidays in 2020); and for garden supply trips in late February and early March for the next season. For comparison, products purchased during the late winter 2019 garden supply trip will likely be arriving in late December or early January 2020.

He tailors the trips based on where the retailers want to go and what type of product they're looking for. So who typically goes on these types of buying trips?

“Single-store destinations work well for me, but I enjoy working with garden centers with multiple stores, as well,” Tom says. “I don’t work with any big box stores and I stay away from anybody who isn’t a garden center. I’ve been in the industry for over 30 years and I had a good garden center customer base when I worked for wholesalers. I feel I can connect with them and prefer to do business with them.”

Tom has noticed the biggest obstacle to retailers buying direct is simply getting on the plane, especially if they’re unfamiliar with the countries they’ll be visiting. For the holiday trips, retailers head to China, the Philippines and Thailand, while the garden supply trips include Vietnam and India.

Heather encourages retailers who’re interested to take the plunge. “Don’t be afraid to dive in,” she says. “This is a fantastic opportunity to boost margin, learn about the product you already sell, and meet the people who design and manufacture it.”

She adds translation wasn’t an issue, as there are staff present to translate, making communication with vendors easy. “Glenhaven does a great job of vetting each potential supplier before bringing in buyers,” she notes.

Trip Prep

Sometimes there’s a fair amount of preparation required to travel overseas, so I asked Tom what retailers would need to do ahead of time. He arranges the suppliers based on the categories retailers are interested in buying and sends those itineraries out in advance. He tells retailers which hotels to book and what flights to arrange. After that, Glenhaven takes care of ground transportation, train tickets and vendor visits, as well as facilitates meals. Of course, retailers will need a valid passport and visas are needed for China, Vietnam and India. I also asked about vaccinations and none are currently needed for any of the countries on the itinerary.

“We stay in 5-star hotels,” Tom adds. “They’re typically Western brands and I would say the accommodations are typically a notch above where people typically stay in the U.S. People are very comfortable on these trips.”

Dress code is casual, but professional, and comfortable. Retailers spend a lot of time traveling in cars or on trains, so comfort is important.

Following Up

It’s important to note, too, that buyers don’t have to go on the trip every year or even at all. Glenhaven places direct orders from retailers without going on the trip, but Tom encourages retailers to take the trip for more than just the buying.

“There’s a camaraderie between buyers and how they’re educating one another,” he notes. “It’s pretty powerful stuff, the alliances being built on these trips. That’s one of the biggest benefits from it, not just that they’re getting products at a premium price.”

He adds gift buyers often go on the trip every year because there’s so much new product introduced annually.

“When we go in the fall—this is for Christmas 2020—they’ll see what will be new in January in Atlanta. All those themes start in Asia and buyers see those early on.” **GP**

To find out more about overseas buying trips with Glenhaven Home & Holiday, visit the website at glenhavenhomeholiday.com.