Communicating with manufacturers

Contents

Introduction

You are probably reading this document for one of two reasons.

1. You are unsure of engineering documentation within the context of manufacturing quotation
2. You are familiar with such documentation, but have not dealt with Chinese manufacturers before

If you are in the former group then you should find this very informative. If you are in the latter, then we can happily tell you that you will find that Chinese manufacturers are very similar to other manufacturers around the world. Any differences are cultural, not technical, and you might like to review our document on working with Chinese manufacturers.

Emma and her exer-seat

To explain how one progresses from having an idea to having a well articulated description of a product for quotation, and to show the different types of enquires that people make, we will use a fictitious case.

The idea

Emma has an idea. Many people enjoy exercise balls (the large brightly coloured one that can also act as seat). However, these balls are large and they have a style that is unsuitable for most homes. Emma would like to distribute a seat that has similar functional qualities, but looks more like regular furniture. Such a product could be sold to people who live in small apartments. The seat could be placed in the corner when not in use and look like another piece of

furniture. Thus it would take minimal valuable space and it would not detract from the style of the customer's home.

Making an enquiry for a quotation manufacturing

We will look at the three different developmental stages that an idea will go through to become a well articulated description of a product. Each stage also represents one of the three common inquiry types that we have seen submitted by people who want something made in China:

1. the very basic
2. the basic
3. the complete

As you read through this, think about how far along your idea is from initial concept to complete design. This will give you an idea of how much more work is required before you should contact a potential supplier.

Note one other thing. The preparatory effort required for the enquiry increase by an order of magnitude as it is developed from the very basic, to the basic, to the complete enquiry. It's quite easy to write down a brief description of your idea, it takes about 1o times longer to draw up a concept sketch, and then about 10 times longer again to provide complete engineering drawings. You do need to be prepared if you are going to enquire about the cost of production.

The very basic

This is how Emma's enquiry would typically look if she made a basic enquiry.

Hello

I would like you to make me an exercise device that I will call the exer-seat. It is basically a seat on springs. It should be high enough for the average western

woman to use while sitting in front of the TV. Please let me know if you could make such a device and how much you would charge.

Emma probably has a fairly good idea of what she wants, but there is no way that a manufacturer (even one in her own country) would be able to work out what she wants. If they can't do this, then they can't quote. A design house would have questions about this too, even though they are the ones who would usually deal with clients who provide only a guide about what they want. All Emma really has here is a description of an idea.

So what does Emma need to work on here? Well for starters, we need to imagine what this device would look like so some kind of image would help. Also, we have no idea how many are to be made. Without this information it is impossible to provide an accurate quote. This brings us to the next type of enquiry that we have seen.

The basic

With more effort, Emma's enquiry would probably be something like the following.

Hello
I would like to make an exercise device like the one shown in the attached picture. When the customer sits in this chair they are not fully supported. The need to keep on using their muscles to stop from falling over, but they are still kept at a comfortable height. This extra effort burns energy while the person sits on the seat. I imagine it will often be used while watching TV so it needs to be high enough for the average western woman to use while sitting in front of the TV.

The market will be similar to that of those large exercise balls, but it will be for people who want something with more style. So it needs to look good, maybe some steel pieces to fit with the look of modern furniture. Also, I want it to look like a lot of thought has gone into the design so any extra features that you can think of would be good.

I anticipate that I would sell between 50 000 and 100 000. Please let me know if you could make such a device and how much you would charge.

So now we have an idea of what the device is and how it works. However, this is really a request for a design house. Even if the image was a photo of a prototype, there would still be some design work required before an accurate quote could be provided.

That's not to say that what Emma has provided is completely useless. With this information she could gain some indication of expected cost: just an estimate though. With the estimate, Emma might decide that the venture is no longer worth it; the costs might be so high that she just can't see how she could sell enough at a profitable price to make the effort worth her while. On the other hand, if she finds that the estimated price looks good, then she would want an accurate quotation.

So what's missing here? For an accurate quote the manufacturer needs a detailed description of each part and how the final product is assembled. Emma, might choose to do these drawings herself or she might contract this work out to a design house. In either case, she would then have enough documents to fully explain the product, and allow for accurate quotation.

The complete

A detailed description of each part and assembly operation would make Emma's inquiry look something like the following.

Attachments: Exer-seat BOM; A-001-Exer-Seat; SA-001-Base; SA-002-Seat; SA-003-Spring; P-003-Button; P-004-Seat; P-005-PlateTop; P-006-PlateBottom; P-007-Base; P-008-Foot; P-009-Spring

Hello

Please quote on the attached BOM and CAD files.

Now we have something! Emma can confidently send this to a potential supplier and they will know exactly what she wants.

Note also how she now has a fully defined design. This significantly reduces the likelihood of the factory making something that deviates from Emma's desire.

A further benefit of developing a complete design is that other potential problems are identified before significant expense is incurred. Although it is not clearly demonstrated in this example, the act of designing reveals a multitude of issues that can be resolved cheaply before manufacturing.

Where are you?

If you are anything like most people we have worked with, you have a basic enquiry. This can be ok for simple product and assuming the supplier can speak English. But if you want to be sure, then you need to work on you enquiry. Get it to the complete stage.

How best to do that? The same way Emma did. It was simply a case of satisfying the checklist and completing the BOM template. You can download both of these for **free** from the GetYourStuffMadeInChina website.

Closing

We hope you now understand what you need to do to acquire an accurate quote for the manufacture of your product. It is not complicated or terribly hard, but it can require some effort. You might like contract a design house. Such organisations can be found locally in China, and some feature in our directory. However, if you are still unsure of how best to develop a complete type enquiry or if you have only a basic enquiry and you would like to have an estimate of cost first, then please consider our product review service.

Finally, regardless of which path you take. We hope you pursue you idea. We also hope that if you choose not to it is only because of commercial realities, and not difficulties with manufacture. It is the development of new and better products that increase the material wealth of society and raise the standard of living. That's why we became engineers, and it is good to help others do the same.

Good luck!