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MTC insensitive to country's background

Mohd Salim Mohd Tahir

I AM a Bumiputera furniture manufacturer and exporter and I have been in this business for the past 12 years. I started small as a buying agent, a trader and thereafter got a factory of my own.

Few Bumiputera companies can last that long since the business is internationally competitive and needs marketing skills. The personal touch is a must with overseas buyers.

The furniture business is dominated by the Chinese. Some started as backyard industries and then grew up to be what they are today. Big and small Chinese furniture manufacturers too have had their fair share of closures as well as the Bumiputeras.

The furniture industry is under the purview of the Ministry of Primary Industries. The minister has been making regular statements about pushing the industry to greater heights in the world market and this we appreciate.

In January 1999 he said after his return from the IMM Cologne Fair in Germany that the Malaysian booth was like a pasar malam. He wanted immediate changes. The Malaysian Timber Industries Board which had been organising the event for years was replaced and taken over by the Malaysian Timber Council.

The same year, my company applied to participate in the Cologne Fair to be held in January 2000. MTC was given the task of organising and inviting interested participants.

In April 1999, I submitted my application along with catalogues and a cheque for RM11,500, being deposit of 50 per cent for the booth space. My application was received. The cheque was banked in.

That same month officials from MTC came to my showroom. After inspecting my products they left without commenting. Since they had cashed my cheque I assumed they had accepted my application. I waited patiently, yet nothing came of it.

To my surprise, seven months after applying I received a letter from MTC saying my company was not qualified and rejected. Nothing was mentioned about my deposit.

I then wrote to the MTC and demanded my money back. The reply came with the refund but did not offer any explanation or apology on why they had kept my money for so long.

MTC acted in a lackadaisical attitude. The money if kept for seven months in a financial institution could have earned interest or could have been used as working capital. I missed one year of business. Luckily, I had other foreign fairs to keep business moving.

After staying away from MTC for two years, I decided I must try again to join the said Show for the year 2002. This time I thought I might stand a chance but to my dismay they again rejected my application. Again no reason was given and my deposit cheque of RM 13,800 was returned too.

I called MTC asking for reasons why my application was rejected and what criteria MTC adopted. An official told me that to meet MTC criteria, the product must be of high quality, presentable and acceptable in the international market. But do they have the expertise to judge my product?

So my Malaysian products which have been tested and certified for use according to the USA Safety Standard, European Standard and Australia/NZ Standard was not accepted by Malaysians when foreign buyers would gladly accept.

What disappoints me is that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been constantly vocal in getting Bumiputera participation in the furniture business. But here we have MTC who did not consider a lone Bumiputera among all the Chinese.

All the companies selected were Chinese furniture companies. This shows that MTC has not been sensitive to our country's background.

Perhaps the minister could look into this matter. MTC should look into a company's background before rejecting or accepting, not depend solely on cosmetic catalogues.

My products have been continuously accepted by Canada's biggest furniture manufacturer, and also imported by Australia's largest furniture retail chain store. Can MTC still say that my furniture does not meet their criteria?