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Staks takes pride selling Malaysia to Europe

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JUERGEN A.R. Staks may have chosen the wrong profession when he set foot into the world of diplomacy 31 years ago.

With his unbridled enthusiasm, dogged determination and endless energy, the German Ambassador to Malaysia would have made an excellent salesman.

The 62-year-old envoy has, nevertheless, put his innate marketing skills to good use quite late into his career by selling the biggest product one could possibly find - an entire nation.

Meet the man who may be Malaysia's best salesman in Europe, most certainly in Germany.

Just last month, the effer-vescent envoy travelled to Hamburg to pitch Malaysia's multifarious attractions to a mixed crowd of German businessmen wanting to know more about a country which they had heard about but wanted to know more of.

Their knowlege had been mostly culled from what Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, arguably Malaysia's leading salesman on the international arena for two decades, has been doing for the nation.

Staks and Malaysian Consul-General in Hamburg, Datuk Edgar Nordmann, spoke to the entrepreneurs for hours about why they should invest in, or at least trade with, Malaysia.

"They were eager to hear about Malaysia, especially about the leadership transition from Dr Mahathir to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. I explained that Malaysia was almost the ideal investment destination for Germans and that they should not miss any opportunity to enter the Malaysia market," he said in an interview at his spanking new office at level 26 of Menara Tan and Tan along Jalan Ampang.

And just before the Hamburg rendezvous, he had been talking to another august gathering in Germany about why German heads of missions in Asia should meet in Malaysia soon to discuss regional affairs.

He is, incidentally, convinced that the German interests abroad should also be managed at regional, perhaps Asean, level instead of just bilaterally so that a perspective view could be obtained.

And in this respect, he volunteered to host the first regional German heads of mission conference in Malaysia "so that they can see Putrajaya and understand that Malaysia is a country whose time has come".

The German Ambassadors Conference, as it turned out, did not see things quite like him but Staks is happy just the same.

"I got them listening. This is what is important. They are now aware of Malaysia's potential. I will pursue this again," says the irrepressible ambassador who does not believe in giving up on things close to his heart.

At this juncture, one may be excused for asking - given the fact that he owes nothing to this country and will not get anything for his toil besides a personal satisfafaction from a job well done - if Staks is for real.

And therein lies the key to his personality and the secret behind the vitality of German-Malaysian relations.

Staks, who has been in Malaysia for just over 21 years, has always been known to be a hands-on man who never leaves anything to chance if he can help it.

He has a passion for Malaysia. There is an obvious synergy between him and Malaysia's national personality that has made its promotion almost an obsession for him.

"I consider myself a full-time salesman for Malaysia and the best thing about it is that I don't charge," he says to underscore the links between him and a country he has come, by his own admission, to truly love.

This love has been manifested in numerous ways notably in the blossoming of German-Malaysian ties, the blooming of trade ties and the maturing to an extraordinary level of people-to-people contacts. He was also fortunate to have his head of government, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, visit Malaysia in May this year.

A rare privilege indeed for any serving ambassador.

On a more practical level, the German embassy moved from a rambling old structure almost beside the American Embassy in Jalan U Thant to new ultra-modern premises that has given him a panoramic view of the diplomatic enclave. Yet, like the consummate salesman that he is, he is still not happy with what is being done to sell Malaysia abroad.

"There is so much more to be done. It is a question of marketing. There has to be better job done of selling Malaysia," he says, adding carefully that he did not want to be seen as criticising Malaysians responsible for this task.

He is quick to point out that there may be numerous constraints in marketing a country especially when competition on the international scene was so heavy.

Staks loves to talk about how German-Malaysian ties can be boosted even further beyond excellent trade ties (RM19.13 billion in bilateral trade last year with the balance in Malaysia's favour), the number of German companies in the country and the generally huge German presence in education, culture, arts and food.

But he is also one to walk the talk.

He is in the process of putting together a project that may cement bilateral relations to literally last generations.

He has been working on getting the University of Essen-Duisburg to establish an engineering faculty at University Kebangsaan Malaysia to train Malaysians.

"We are in the midst of serious discussions on the matter. If UKM can offer us the venue, we can provide the professional staff and administrative costs," he says of what could be the first such initiative between a Malaysian public university and a foreign university.

The project has received the blessings of the German business community in Malaysia which is seeing it as an opportunity to identify graduates for future recruitment by the 350 German companies of all sizes in the country.

Staks is quick to point out that Germans have always valued education which has seen several German educational institutions established.

Besides the Goethe Institute, a veritable Malaysian institution providing deep insight into the world of the German language and culture, the German-Malaysian Institute is also making a name for itself.

GMI is clearly a project after his heart. He is enamoured of its potential as an instrument to boost bilateral relations at the most basic of levels.

"We will be sending 150 young people to Germany this year for further training with 40 from GMI. We hope that some of these people will one day become chief executive officers or general managers of German companies in Malaysia."

For Staks, as for many German companies, this is not a pipedream. It is the natural extension of the relationship that began with the early import of Mercedes Benz, Volkswagen and Grundig into Malaysia at the turn of the last century to another level of friendship.

Indeed, ties have come a full circle with the export today of precision

products from Malaysia to Germany.

Staks is also actively pursuing a better understanding of Islam by Germans from the Malaysian experience.

He helped initiate the posting of an observer from the German Federal Government, Dr Achim Umstaetter, to the German Embassy last year to explain contemporary Islam to the German people.

"This was done as a result of the Sept 11 incident. It was to counter the growing trend of blaming Islam for the sins of a few. We wanted to increase co-operation and understanding between (Christian majority) Germany and (Muslim majority) Malaysia," he says.

The job description is unique as far as the Malaysian diplomatic scene is concerned with few foreign missions having staff specifically studying Islam in the country.

Does the man whose day never ends before dark ever relax?

Yes, he does. But even then, he has ensured that his hobbies - he jogs as often as he can and has climbed the occasional mountain (Gunung Kinabalu) - push him to the limit.

Staks, who has three years to go before retirement (about the same as the general term of a diplomat in most postings), is understandably coy when asked if he would like to spend the last leg of his career in Malaysia.

While he does not answer the question in as many words as this writer would like, the smile on his face betrays him.

It appears that Malaysians will not be seeing the last of him for some time to come.