

## Market Me has goal to market you – in China

Two Hayle-based entrepreneurs have launched a one-stop-shop to support small businesses into exporting to China.

Market Me China is the brainchild of Mo Fenghua, who offers marketing services focused upon connecting small and medium sized enterprises with business connections in the Far East.

Tapping into the technical skills of her web designer and developer husband Darren Stevens, Ms Mo has already attracted international queries from businesses seeking a route into China and its burgeoning consumer market.

Market Me China's aim is to help western companies expand their business into China's market and a country with more than half a billion internet users.

It offers China search engine optimisation, pay per click advertising, social media marketing, web design, branding, Chinese translation and copy-writing as well as customer liaison and support, and Chinese language and culture training.

Ms Mo has a background in China-based online marketing and is also search engine optimisation trained by Netconcepts, the top SEO company in China.

Over the past few months, she has been establishing links within Cornwall's business community, attending networking events and also drawing on start-up support and advice from Outset Cornwall.

"We have already had international enquiries," said Ms



Mo Fenghua and husband Darren Stevens aim to establish export connections for SMEs seeking to trade in China

Mo, who was born and raised in Guangzhou in southern China.

"It doesn't matter where businesses are based, as long as they are looking at the Chinese market. Clients can sell products or services – for instance one company is a business that supports people to apply for a Green Card; another has apartments to let in New York."

Closer to home, Market Me China has worked for Roddas, to translate their marketing material and look at how the

brand will target Chinese consumers.

"It's very important to understand Chinese consumers," says Ms Mo. "Not everyone is familiar with Western foods, but if you tell them it's a famous brand, they will give it a go."

Market Me China aims to have secured a portfolio of 20 international small and medium sized business clients within the next 12 months.

The company says its tailor-made strategies and links with China-based marketing pro-

fessionals will save business from having to find different agencies for different needs.

"Market Me China provides a unique experience for the client, who can learn more about the culture, understand how online marketing works in China but also have us as liaison support to overcome any language barriers," adds Ms Mo.

"We are confident that with this combination we can help clients reach their business goals in one of the world's largest economies."

## CVA agreement can give creditors a better return

### BUSINESS MATTERS

This week **Lisa Thomas**, an insolvency practitioner with Plymouth-based Neville & Co, looks at company voluntary arrangements and how they can allow a business to continue trading through financial difficulties



Last week I talked about liquidation being one of the most common insolvency procedures used when a company is insolvent and there is no real prospect of it recovering. Sometimes when we meet directors for the first time we can see potential for the company to continue trading if only it could get control of its current problems. In those circumstances it may be right to consider a company voluntary arrangement (CVA) as an alternative to liquidation.

### What exactly is a company voluntary arrangement?

In a nutshell, a CVA is an agreement between a company and its creditors which is legally binding and approved via the court. More often than not the company proposes to pay its creditors a better return than the sum they would get in liquidation but over a much longer period of time.

If creditors accept the proposed CVA then a line is effectively drawn and all the old liabilities are frozen. The company then continues to trade under the control of the directors but must pay for its ongoing supplies and liabilities.

### How does it work?

We help to put the CVA proposals together which includes a company history, a financial snapshot of its current position and some forecasts. Hopefully that will show that the business has a future and that it is better if it carries on.

We then produce a report to the court stating whether we believe the CVA is a good idea (or not) and is a viable alternative to liquidation. We then help the company call the necessary meetings of creditors and shareholders to vote on the acceptance or rejection of the CVA. If the CVA proposals are accepted by 75% in value of the

creditors that vote then it is approved.

Those that do not bother to vote are still legally bound by it and are locked in. Quite often a 'horse trade' follows where the offer to creditors is renegotiated with key creditors before it is finally approved. There is a time limit of up to 14 days after the first meeting to do that.

The type of creditors bound by it include HM Revenue and Customs for tax, VAT and PAYE, trade suppliers, unsecured bank debts, council business rates and employee claims (even from a tribunal). Directors are often surprised that all these debts can in fact be legally frozen and the interest and penalties stopped.

### Why doesn't everyone do one?

On the face of it a CVA might sound like the perfect solution to some directors but it is not always that straightforward. In my experience CVAs tend to have quite a high failure rate in the one or two years after they have been approved. Directors will need to consider what caused the company to have financial problems in the first place and make sure they have solved those problems so they do not happen again.

That said, CVAs have their place and are very useful for allowing a company to continue trading in the right circumstances.

If you think you may need advice with regard to a CVA or alternative insolvency procedure, or if you are a creditor and need advice as to

whether or not to vote in favour or against one, please feel free to get in touch with me on 01752 786800.

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# The Money Group throws a lifeline to Diligenta workers

BY GORDON RICHARDSON

Hopes have been raised that an expanding Westcountry business could offer a lifeline for hundreds of Exeter call centre workers facing redundancy.

Outsourcing firm Diligenta plans to close its office at Winslade Park, Clyst St Mary, where about 340 staff are currently employed. The first redundancies are expected early next year, continuing in phases until closure in 2015.

Colleagues who are directly employed by Friends Life are unaffected by the move, as the life and pensions firm plans to relocate to a smaller office in the city. The majority of staff at the site transferred to Diligenta last year under a 15-year outsourcing contract, with only around 80 remaining directly employed by Friends Life.

Since the office closure plan was announced last week, financial management company the Money Group, which has call centres in Truro and Ply-

mouth, has already contacted Exeter Chamber of Commerce to express its interest in hiring some of the affected staff.

The business has expanded rapidly in recent years. After running out of space in Truro, it established a second call centre in Plymouth, where, at the end of 2012, it launched a recruitment drive for the first tranche of the 300 staff it anticipates that will be eventually required.

Derek Phillips, vice president of Exeter Chamber of Commerce, said: "Obviously it's a great disappointment to lose so many jobs in the area, but fortunately we have a fairly long lead-in time so hopefully it will mitigate some of the problem. We hope to find people like the Money Group who may be interested in Diligenta's employees."

The chamber has put the Money Group in touch with Diligenta's HR director Paul Flanders, who is also due to meet the leaders of Exeter and East Devon councils later this month to discuss the plans.

"We have had a fairly encouraging response from Diligenta," added Mr Phillips. "They are closing, and I don't think we're going to change their mind on that score, but it's how we deal with the problem."

Diligenta plans to close its Exeter and Salisbury offices

### 'We are shocked by the scale of the proposed job losses'

Chris Gray

and consolidate the work at its sites in Bristol and Dorking.

One Exeter-based employee said: "Staff knew that management were looking for a smaller site for their Exeter branch as the building was too big for their needs, but it has come as a big shock."

Unite regional officer Chris Gray said: "We are shocked and disappointed by the scale of the proposed job losses – and

angry that up to 15% of this work is being offshored to India. The workers being dismissed have given many years' loyal service to Friends Life."

Exeter MP Ben Bradshaw said: "This will be a worrying time for the loyal and hard-working staff at Winslade Park. I'm sorry the company has decided to concentrate this work elsewhere."

A spokesman for Diligenta said: "We plan to exit the Winslade Park site in Exeter by the end of February 2015. We are committed to supporting impacted employees throughout the process and our current plans are to retain a very limited presence in the city to accommodate specialist roles to support our future business plans."

A Friends Life spokesman said: "We will remain in the current office until December 2014 at the earliest, at which point we intend to open a small regional office for all Exeter-based Friends Life colleagues."

## Grand Designs guru launches £1m Crowdcube funding pitch

Grand Designs presenter Kevin McCloud has launched a £1 million funding bid for investment in his Somerset-based custom house-building company.

His Frome-based business, Hab (Happiness, Architecture, Beauty) Housing has laid out a pitch to members of the public, via Exeter-based Crowdcube.

It is seeking to expand on the back of a UK-wide housing shortfall, with its custom-build model that gives prospective homeowners a greater say on how their new house will look.

It is a popular design and build concept on the continent, where, says managing director Mike Roberts, 60% of houses are built "for an identified customer."

The business aims to raise a million in cash pledges with a minimum £100 each, from so-called armchair investors signed up to the crowdfunding platform.

Hab is offering an equity stake totalling 13.33% of the business, with a discount – matched to the value of their investment – of up to 5% on the purchase of a new home built by the company.

Mr McCloud established Hab Housing in 2007, to create housing schemes that offer homebuyers an alternative to "identikit" developer-led projects.

They are available as fully-completed builds with designer interiors, through to a "roof and shell" option for self-build style projects.