Most of us have heard that offshore outsourcing of dental restorations began sometime in the early 1980s but, actually, it’s been a worldwide practice for about 40 years, particularly among laboratories in Australia, New Zealand and a few European countries.

When LMT revealed 25 years ago that California-based Continental Dental Ceramics had a laboratory in the Philippines, its Polish-born Owner Jerry Doviack became somewhat of a pariah in the U.S., ostracized and reprimanded by his peers, including members of the prestigious Dental Lab Conference. To Jerry, raised in Europe, where many countries are in close proximity, his plan was nothing particularly earth shattering or unique; it just made good business sense.

Now, of course, the practice of offshoring is widespread among laboratories and is almost completely “out of the closet.” Nevertheless, it’s difficult to keep politics and our desire to maintain our economic freedom out of any discussion regarding offshore outsourcing. On the surface it seems like a practical business option; and just that: an option. But I wrestle with the idea of trading with countries governed by politicians who oppress its people.

China, to whom our country owes money, is still a Communist dictatorship. It imposed untold horrors on its citizens. Yet we—foreign business interests—are helping to make that country the next economic world power. Financial soothsayers forecast this will happen by 2020. Are our eyes wide open? Will the year 2020 be a lesson in hindsight for us?

On the other hand, we are helping China’s citizens, recovering from decades of poverty, rebuild their lives. Man’s inhumanity to mankind repeats itself in every culture, including our own, so how can any of us make an educated judgment about the right thing to do? We cannot fault China’s victims—its citizens—for taking full advantage of their new economic freedom by building businesses, creating jobs and reaching across the seas for customers. We can’t even claim they are “guilty” of price-cutting. Their overhead is lower. Period.

Nor can we claim the quality of their work is poorer than ours. LMT’s own 1986 and 2007 Crown Experiments proved that the work coming from China is equal to some of the work done in the U.S.

Whether we choose to buy only American goods, buy goods made overseas, or partner with foreign interests, there are cost factors involved and we make personal choices based on what we deem works best for keeping our businesses solvent. See details of my visit to China on the next page.

* Taken from the 1968 comedy
In Zhuhai, DAMAS-certified Veden Dental Labs, Inc. is sharpening its business strategies in preparation for the changes it sees coming. Its business within its own country is quite strong and Veden plans to capitalize on this by opening dental clinics throughout China.

Though still in the experimental phase, it already has a “test” clinic in Shanghai. The clinic employs a dentist from Alaska and another from Great Britain, not only because “there’s an acute shortage of dentists here,” according to Sophia Wu, Veden’s Vice President, but because the newly and superbly wealthy Chinese nationals are “westernizing” and that includes a desire for “The [bright and white] Western Smile.”

Historically, “want” dentistry has not been valued in China; the culture says “people only see your teeth when you smile.” But according to Wu, things are changing and there’s likely to be a lot of demand for restorative dentistry down the road.

In the meantime, Veden derives about 60-70% of its offshore business from laboratories in the U.S. Located on a lush and modern 40,000-sq-ft, gated campus in a modernized town that was once a fishing village, the laboratory is heavily focused on individualized customer service.

The campus is beautiful and provides a home away from home by creating a social community for its employees when they aren’t working. The employee dormitories are surrounded by a par-three golf course, a basketball court, cafeteria, pool table, and landscaped gardens with water features and geese.

The main building that houses the four-story laboratory also houses VIP sleeping facilities for guests; an apartment for Vice President Wu; and a master suite for Veden’s President, George Chang, so everyone can be available as needed, 24/7.

Chang, originally from Taiwan (as is Wu), transformed Veden into a multinational laboratory, with transport services through Hong Kong, seven years ago.

Its quality assurance department—with a staff of 11—is available during U.S. daytime hours. There is also a technical liaison in the U.S. who acts as go-between on all technical matters between here and Zhuhai. “It’s of critical importance to us that clients get immediate assistance, regardless of time of day,” says Edwin Tse, Senior Consultant.

In fact, its largest clients—whether here or in Europe—have dedicated technical teams in Zhuhai. (France is its second largest client base.) “The key purpose is to ensure that prescriptions
are properly followed. Each client has different standards—and different expectations—so we can provide customized service accordingly,” explains Wu. The relationships built with its clients also help Veden discover ways to continuously upgrade its service capabilities.

Using Captek, Empress, e.max, Valplast, Projet, Noritake, CEREC, Wieland, KATANA and more (you get the picture: familiar and well-known brands), Veden’s 1,100 technicians and 1,300 administrative employees work 10-hour shifts so that production continues almost around the clock. The laboratory also has a complete CAD/CAM department and a robust training program that includes the use of microscopes. Its attention to this sort of detail backs up the company mission and, literally, defines its name: Value Excellence Dedication Education Nobility.

“Technology is going to lead our industry,” Chang told us. “I hope your visit here can help clear up some misperceptions about the work being done in China so others can make an educated decision that helps their own business prosper. We think we offer a means of providing a higher margin of profit and offer an alternative when personnel are hard to find.”

Sophia Wu, Veden’s Vice President, lives on the premises. Here, she explains that materials used for each case are recorded with a certificate of ISO traceability.

Veden’s 1,100 technicians, who work eight-hour shifts six days a week, have a company website on which they can post messages, artwork and news.
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