

## Building a Business in Russia

### **Jeroen Ketting, Owner, The Lighthouse Group**

My real introduction to Russia took place during the crash of August 1998. Until that time, I had lived a sheltered expat life, going to expat parties and socializing with Western friends. "Work hard — play hard" was the motto of those days. In the months after the crisis, most expat workers were sent home, including all my friends. From that moment on, I was lucky enough to make many interesting and great Russian friends who really taught me to understand and appreciate Russia.

I first came to Russia as a law student in 1994 and decided to stay on, working for a Dutch company. In early 1998, I established my first business; a call center for telemarketing and B2B service numbers. When the 1998 crisis hit all my clients cancelled their contracts, politely asked me to call back a year later, and consequently this business went belly-up.

I couldn't give up and run home, so in early 1999, I decided to sell the only thing that I still had to sell: myself.

I started assisting and advising Western companies working in Russia, many of them Dutch, helping them find partners, set up offices and production facilities, and aiding in negotiations and mediations. It started as a one-man-show operating out of my apartment but soon I needed to hire a secretary, an assistant and consultants and move into an office. And this was the beginning of the Lighthouse Group.

Russia is challenging. It takes a lot of energy, but is also energizing to work here, and it keeps you on your toes. In the West, we suffer from the narcosis of wealth. In Holland we have our mortgages, steady jobs, holidays two or three times a year — we live well. But people became dulled by this lifestyle. In Russia, this isn't the case. You don't know what tomorrow will bring, and you don't know what the result of yesterday will be. You have to stay alert all the time.

One of the most frustrating aspects of living in Russia for a long time is that you have to constantly fight against the misconceptions that Westerners have concerning Russia, including fear of the Russian mafia, corruption and unreliable business partners. These stereotypes are unjustified. I guess years from now, I will still be explaining that all that's needed for success in Russia is to treat Russia with respect, affinity and an understanding of its market and culture. This culture has in many ways become my own over the last fourteen years. The kind of generosity, sincerity and depth of friendship I have found in Russia are things that do not come easily in Holland. It will be hard to start working anywhere else. That's why we recently started operating in Cuba; it's like Russia 20 years ago, but with a Caribbean twist.

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