Alibaba woos US small business

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China's e-commerce giant Alibaba Group chose Detroit, Michigan to stage its inaugural two-day Gateway '17 Summit, which kicked off on Tuesday and is designed to educate American small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) on the Chinese market and consumer demands to ultimately help them sell to China.  
Approximately 3,000 American SMEs registered for the summit, almost triple the number Alibaba expected. Among them, 673 are from Michigan and 103 of those from the Detroit metro area.  
In a conversation with American SME representatives on Tuesday, Alibaba founder and executive chairman Jack Ma said this first-ever event was "what he has been dreaming of for 18 years" - a trade show held solely for the benefit of small businesses.  
Industry observers believe the event is also to fulfill the promise Ma made during his meeting with the then-president-elect Donald Trump in January - that Alibaba could help create 1 million US jobs over five years by enabling small businesses to sell goods on Alibaba's e-commerce platforms.  
Small businesses in China have an acclaimed record of helping Alibaba lay a solid foundation for a decade of rapid growth, and transform the e-commerce company into today's robust conglomerate that has 50,000 employees worldwide and has generated $547 billion in gross merchandise volume as of March 2017, said Ma.  
The Chinese success stories can be replicated in the US, he added, "Alibaba is made in China but our mission is to help SMEs worldwide."  
Calling himself a true believer in globalization and free trade, Ma hopes globalization could be more "inclusive and support SMEs' participation in globalization".  
Having accumulated more than 800 flight hours last year by attending trade shows and expos worldwide to promote Alibaba's business solutions, Ma said he plans to fly longer hours, probably 1,000 or so this year, to help American SMEs grow globally and sell to China.  
"This summit is just the very beginning of our endeavors in the US," he said.  
Becky Feinberg-Galvez, CEO of Shop4Ties, brought samples of ties and bows from her 30-year-old family factory in Chicago. She said China is a market too huge to miss, and "this summit is educational and informational."  
Timeless, a skincare products manufacturer in South California, wants to learn more about the Chinese market at the event. "It's eye-opening to know the huge market potential in China," Glenda Nunez, customer relations manager, said. "We are in the process to work with Tmall to expand our business to China."  
On Monday when meeting with Michigan State Lieutenant Governor Brain Calley, Ma shared his thoughts on connecting Midwest small businesses through Alibaba with the 300 million Chinese middle class who won't hesitate to pay heftily for good-quality products.  
Representing the vast Midwestern states in the US and hometown to tens of thousands of small businesses and farms, Michigan suffered heavy losses in the economic recession of 2008 and is still struggling to bring back its vigor.  
"When the economy went down, big companies just left, but small businesses chose to stay," said Ma. "We want to help them succeed and grow through the internet."  
Calley agreed closer and stronger business collaboration with China will benefit the local economy. He said he hopes to launch more cooperation with Alibaba on logistics and tourism in the future.  
"We are not Amazon or eBay, we are not selling Alibaba brands," said Ma. "Instead, we are helping American small businesses sell their high-quality products to China. We are happy to help farmers in Michigan to sell their fruits and vegetables to Asia."

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