

Hinrich Leaders of Global Trade

Distinguished members of the international trade community who have demonstrated their commitment to developing the next generation of trade leaders.



“Success is not a walk in the park. There will be many roadblocks, but what makes good leaders are people who don’t give up easily.”

Spenser Au
Former CEO of Global Sources

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Trade career highlights

40 years	Global sourcing and e-commerce industry
Executive positions	Former CEO Deputy CEO President of Asian Sales Global Sources
4 years in philanthropy	Board Member Hinrich Foundation
Academics	Business Graduate Hong Kong Baptist University

“A career in trade allows you to have an impact on people’s daily lives all around the globe,” said Spenser Au, former CEO of Global Sources.

Spenser has found immense fulfillment in pursuing a lifelong career in trade. “Trade affects everything: it’s business, but also interaction and exchange between people. It’s exposure to a little of a lot of things and gives a wider perspective about business and the world.”

Enriching people, companies and economies

Having been in the trade sector for more than 40 years, Spenser notes how work in the industry allowed him to be a part of many small businesses success stories.

“During the early part of my work – selling print advertising to link manufacturers in Asia with buyers worldwide – I kept seeing successes, which made me feel really good. Really small companies I worked with grew from a single-person proprietorship to become a sizeable corporation. This made me realize that my career is not just about me – and that kept me going with my job.”

Spenser recalled how Acer, one of the world’s top computer brands, started as an SME in the 1980s and grew to a billion-dollar company in the late 1990s. It started advertising in Asian Sources [now Global Sources] magazines with a one-half page black and white advertisement – and grew to a leading global brand employing nearly 10,000 people directly.

“My work contributed to helping companies create millions of jobs across Asia by linking manufacturers with new buyers around the globe. The skilled jobs created and economic growth is a significant contribution to helping lives through trade.

While Spenser was CEO, the company's annual revenue was over \$150 million, generated by connecting buyers and suppliers through online marketplaces, trade shows, magazines and web applications.

"I wanted to perform well in order to help them grow and succeed. Knowing that you can help make people successful is so rewarding."

Spenser worked his way up in Global Sources, a leading business-to-business company that connects buyers worldwide with suppliers across Asia and China through online and offline channels. While Spenser was CEO, the company's annual revenue was over \$150 million, generated by connecting buyers and suppliers through online marketplaces, trade shows, magazines and web applications.

The Hong Kong-based firm is at the forefront of facilitating global trade. During Spenser's tenure, the company served thousands of export manufacturers and traders, and more than 1.4 million international buyers, including 95 of the world's top 100 retailers. It had more than 2,000 employees and 60 offices worldwide.

Interest in travel and trade from an early age

Spenser was always interested in trade. Growing up with parents involved in running a wholesale consumer goods business in Hong Kong, he knew early on that he would follow in their footsteps. His interest in travel further opened his eyes to the world.

"I am really interested in business, but it was my early exposure to trade that really prompted me. My family would import consumer products from China and sell in Hong Kong, so I had a little understanding already of the trade business. I thought this will give me a chance to grow fast and gain exposure to a variety of things that I could learn from. At the end of the day, I knew I wanted to become a businessman.

"My first job, however, was with a tour agency. I joined that because I want to see more of the world for myself. I had a chance to travel and learn about cultures and business practices beyond Hong Kong. As I started learning about the other countries, I got to see how the world works, which furthered my interest in global trade," he said.

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"I suggest young people should travel as much as they can. They will realize that there's a whole world out there," added Spenser. "It makes you dream bigger."

His interest in trade led him to shift his career to work as an Account Executive for Asian Sources Electronics magazine in 1978. Dedication to work, persistence and being a good listener helped propel Spenser's career growth. He became Regional Sales Manager in 1988, Associate Publisher in 1991, Publisher in 1992 and President of Asian Sales in 1999. He was CEO from 2011 until his retirement in 2016. His career mapped perfectly well to his interest in trade, business, and travel.

"I am very dedicated to assignments and doing them wholeheartedly. I'm really focused when I decide to do something. One of my mottos was that if I could not sign a contract with a supplier, I would try to learn at least one thing from them that would help me expand my knowledge," Spenser said.

His attitude of being a "solution provider" also helped him advance very early on in his career.

"I really focused my energy into making things right and achieving the best result. When I fail, I always examine the reason why it did not work out to understand

what went wrong, learn from it, and hopefully do not commit the same mistake again.

“Don’t stop with just the problem. You have to find a solution or possible solutions. To some extent, I spend quite a lot of time planning what I want to achieve.

I set my goals and my moves are focused on the process to get the result,” Spenser said.

Mentorship is important to help people grow

For Spenser, mentors also play a very important role in developing the next generation of leaders in any field.

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“It’s important to have a mentor to give advice, to share ideas and sometimes, just to listen to the mentee’s frustrations. A mentor is just like that. They are there to listen, share experiences and give another perspective to an idea. I had very valuable mentors in my senior years while taking my business degree at Hong Kong Baptist University.

“To the younger generation, especially when they start a new job or a new business, they need to listen to experienced people and to learn from their journeys. One does not necessarily have to take their advice, but at least understanding their views will give one a different perspective.”

In Global Sources, he would help his colleagues enhance their performance by delegating tasks and letting them develop their own solutions to problems.

“Normally, I won’t offer a solution right away even if I already have in mind what would work. I usually ask my colleagues to share their thoughts and ideas on how to solve the problem, because that’s how I know they will grow and develop,” he said.

“I listen, look for ideas, suggestions. I want my co-workers to develop so that they can also solve problems and provide solutions by themselves. This gives them a sense of achievement. The organization will be more successful if you involve people in the decision-making,” Spenser said. “Otherwise, if you just keep telling them what to do, they start relying too much on others and they won’t grow.”

The value of patience and learning from failure for success

“Success is not a walk in the park,” Spenser said. “There will be many roadblocks, but what makes good leaders are people who don’t give up easily.

“Failure is an essential part of success. Not every single idea is successful; in many cases, one out of 100 becomes successful. People can give up very quickly on this, but you can learn from failure: you’ll learn what you did wrong, so you won’t commit the same mistakes again.”

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“Don’t be afraid of failure because even the most successful people surely encountered some sort of failure. I made a lot of mistakes in my career as well, but I learned from all of them. We come across a lot of struggles, but we adjust and then we keep trying again. Don’t give up too easily.”

“It’s very easy to give up when something doesn’t work, but if you really believe in your idea, then stay with it. Even if it doesn’t work the first time or the second time, try another approach. If you have a strong belief in an idea, don’t give up!”

Having worked with team members, suppliers and buyers across the world for four decades, Spenser’s vast experience in trade has taught him to be positive and patient too.

“You really need patience to be successful in life. It won’t come right away. Don’t give up. It’s very easy to give up when something doesn’t work, but if you really believe in your idea, then stay with it. Even if it doesn’t work the first time or the second time, try another approach. If you have a strong belief in an idea, don’t give up!”

Spenser is now retired from Global Sources and is a Board Member of the Hinrich Foundation.

Read more inspiring stories from our Hinrich Honorary Leaders of Global Trade [here](#).



“Don’t limit your opportunities by not knowing what your next step is. Just keep reaching out and something will come through for you.”

Dr Lynne Sprugel
Founder and CEO, Abuzz Global



“A global trade leader is a pathfinder — it’s blazing the trail for others to follow in an area that is not well enough understood or appreciated.”

Zoe Dodge
Asia Production Head, Allbirds, Inc.



“Trade has the power to create peace. Trade helps improve the environment, gives people more choices and improves their quality of life.”

Dr Steve Clarke
Senior Program Manager,
Master of Global Trade, RMIT University



“If you want to grow, learn from the best. Find great leaders whom you can learn from and ask for advice and feedback. Mentorship is a powerful catalyst for development.”

Van Nguyen
Vice President, Apparel Sourcing
South East Asia, adidas Sourcing
Limited, Liaison Office in HCMC



“Global trade is an enormous agent of change – it can be used in any pursuit to make the world better, safer, cleaner and more humane.”

Andrew Schroth
Partner, Grunfeld, Desiderio, Lebowitz,
Silverman & Klestadt LLP



“A true global leader inspires, motivates and cares for their people. This leader serves their team and ensures that they can effectively and efficiently do their work.”

Helmut Schwarting
Managing Director, Markant
Trading Organisation (Far East)



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