



## Luxury handbag label meli melo expands into Asia

### Fast facts

**Company:** meli melo

**Industry:** Fashion

**Target Markets:** Japan, South Korea, Singapore

**UKTI Services:** Passport to Export, Gateway to Global Growth, Tradeshow Access Programme, Trade Missions, Overseas Market Introduction Service

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### Introductions, guidance and financial assistance from UK Trade & Investment (UKTI) helped emerging luxury handbag designer meli melo find new business in Japan and South Korea, bringing in over £500,000 in revenue.

Melissa del Bono had always loved designing handbags as a hobby. However, it wasn't until Vogue UK magazine took an interest in her first designs, writing a feature-length profile in 2005 on the budding designer, that her business launched. She sold her one way airplane ticket to Argentina to fund the business and stay in the UK, and devoted herself to her fledgling company. She spent the next several years developing a dedicated and loyal customer base in the UK and Europe.

In 2009 Melissa married Douglas Ker, who left the world of finance in 2013 to join the business as Chief Executive Officer. Together they have made a

concentrated effort to grow the business globally. In November 2013 they opened a standalone boutique in London's fashionable Notting Hill. The luxury bags retail for around £500 each and can also be found in the major department stores around the UK, including Harvey Nichols and Fortnum & Mason, as well as online through the meli melo website. In addition, they are in demand overseas and stocked in luxury department stores around the Middle East, Europe, Asia and North America.

"Our handbags have a distinctive, unique shape and the designs are instantly recognisable," says Douglas. "The signature inverted handles found on each piece were inspired by the traditional wicker baskets used in the Italian village on a volcanic island where Melissa grew up. London is our home for the brand and we manufacture in Italy using high quality Italian leather. The bags appeal to a broad age range

and are worn by a number of celebrities including TV presenter Fearne Cotton, socialite Olivia Palermo and model Georgia Jagger."

### Expert assistance

meli melo has long worked with UKTI, and between 2007 and 2009 it received funding through the Tradeshow Access Programme (TAP) toward the cost of participating in tradeshows in Paris during Fashion Week. This helped the company attract international buyers to grow the business and its reputation. In 2013, with a renewed emphasis on growth, the company joined Passport to Export, the UKTI programme that helps businesses to prepare for international markets. Douglas developed a close relationship with an International Trade Adviser (ITA) who provided advice on how to handle currency risk, made introductions to relevant contacts in the fashion industry and acted as a sounding board.

**“UKTI’s support gave us the confidence to make the leap into this new market. Our effort has paid off and it’s all thanks to the advice we received from UKTI.”**

Douglas Ker, CEO, meli melo

From its website sales, meli melo knew that there was strong interest in its bags from Japan, South Korea and Singapore. Following on its success with Passport to Export, the company joined another UKTI programme, Gateway to Global Growth, for further tailored guidance. In September 2013, UKTI invited the company to participate in its trade mission, GREAT Week Japan. In preparation, meli melo commissioned an Overseas Market Introduction Service (OMIS) report to identify potential buyers and distributors. UKTI then introduced the company to these contacts during the mission.

“UKTI’s support gave us the confidence to make the leap into this new market,” says Douglas. “Implementing what we had learned at a UKTI seminar about presenting at tradeshows, we gave out origami fortune tellers to everyone we met, identifying their particular handbag style. This helped to break the ice and gave these potential buyers something to remember us by. We also made a real effort to establish and build strong personal relationships outside of the tradeshow. Our effort has paid off and it’s all thanks to the advice we received from UKTI.”

### New horizons

When Douglas and Melissa returned to the UK, they were contacted by buyers they had met in Japan and met many of them again at the Premiere Classe trade show in Paris in the winter of 2014. This growing interest from Japan led the company to send one of its London-based employees, who happened to be Japanese, to Tokyo to become a sales representative in January 2014. She was able to speak with the buyers in Japanese as well as provide the company with valuable cultural insight into local business practices. The company is now selling its handbags in over 15 stores in Japan.

The success of the tradeshow in Japan led the company to join UKTI’s GREAT Week mission to South Korea in March

2014. Douglas and a Melissa met with potential buyers and distributors and had two days of one-to-one meetings with the most promising contacts and distributors. As a result, one of the country’s biggest retailers, the Lotte Group, decided to stock meli melo bags in its luxury Avenue L store. Several other boutiques also started carrying the bags after meeting the company at the tradeshow. In May 2014, Douglas and Melissa set out again on a UKTI Trade Mission to Singapore. They received several more orders from local stores and are currently in talks with a distributor there.

“On each of the trade missions we joined, UKTI provided funding toward our costs which made it possible for us to attend,” says Douglas. “To date, we have brought in over £500,000 from sales to Japan and South Korea. We plan to participate again in the GREAT Week trade mission to Japan this October, where we will work to grow our profile and secure a distribution deal. Our business in Asia has surpassed our highest expectations.”

### The UK and Japan

Japan is the third largest economy in the world. With GDP twice the size of the UK and GDP per person nine times that of China, Japan remains the high-tech powerhouse economy of Asia - with the second highest spend worldwide on R&D, a hunger for IP and new trends, and an increasingly globalised outlook.

Exports from the UK to Japan are worth £9.6 billion a year and 450 British companies have operations there. British companies are succeeding in Japan across a wide range of manufacturing, consumer goods, high tech and services sectors.

**For further information about business opportunities in Japan, visit [gov.uk/ukti](http://gov.uk/ukti)**

### Helping you to do business abroad

Doing business in another country can be a challenge, so it’s good to know that UK Trade & Investment is there to help you succeed.

Through a range of unique services, including participation at selected trade fairs, overseas missions and providing bespoke market intelligence, UK Trade & Investment can help you crack foreign markets and quickly get to grips with regulations and business practices overseas.

Through our Passport to Export programme we offer new and inexperienced exporters:

- Free capability assessments
- Support in visiting potential markets
- Mentoring from a local export professional
- Free action plans
- Customised and subsidised training
- Ongoing support once you’re up and running

**UKTI was delighted to support meli melo in its business overseas.**

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