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Economists think that Malaysia may have already seen the worst of the recession. Manufacturing output, which had been falling since January 2008, picked up in February 2009.

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Many Singapore businesses see Malaysia as a low risk market and even an extension of Singapore's domestic market. It is no surprise that Malaysia is Singapore's largest trading partner.

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CASE STUDY**Cityneon builds its way into Malaysia**

The next step for Singapore-listed exhibition services company was across the causeway

Conventions and trade shows essentially place direct competitors side by side in an enclosed space, and corporations turn to more creative solutions to communicate and engage prospects. Cityneon Holdings Limited provides companies the opportunity to project an impressive brand experience by designing and constructing customised modular booth structures.

Cityneon entered the professional exhibition services business in the early 1970s. Its inventory has since grown to be so comprehensive that it has been appointed official rental supplier to some of Asia's largest trade events, such as Middle East Oil & Gas Show & Conference, Food & Hotel Asia, Jewellery Arabia and CommunicAsia.

Besides exhibition and events services, Cityneon has ventured into thematic and interior architecture. Recent projects include the Universal Studios Singapore theme park at Resorts World Sentosa, one of Singapore's two upcoming integrated resorts.

As Malaysia is located right next to Singapore, it made economic sense when Cityneon set up a Malaysian branch in 1975, entering the market as a sole proprietor. With greater land area and a population approximately seven times larger Singapore's then, the exhibitions and events industry in Malaysia had a larger growth prospect as compared to Singapore.

The strategic location of the two countries along the Straits of Malacca facilitated international trade; at one time Malaysia was the largest producer of tin, rubber and palm oil in the world. Cityneon's business volume soared with the booming economy in the 1980s and 1990s, buoyed by the increase in international trade and the birth of many large international and regional trade shows in the exhibition arena.

The Malaysian office brought in steady business, winning major client accounts such as Petronas, Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation, Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation. Cityneon helped its clients reach out to overseas markets through the design and construction of their exhibition pavilions and booths in numerous events.

Nonetheless, Cityneon views the contribution from Malaysia as beyond monetary gains.

"We believe it is very positive on the growth of our employees and cross-straits relations for Singapore to have more local set ups in our neighbouring country," Ko Chee Wah, Group Managing Director at Cityneon, explained.

"This fosters stronger business relations through a win-win position of leveraging on the strengths of the closely related industry tie-ups we have over in Malaysia," he said.

Operations in Malaysia ran smoothly, despite the shortage of professional employees experienced and trained in the specialised Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions (MICE) industry. It proved to be no large setback over the last 40 years, as Cityneon grew and built up a credible track record of providing excellent design and quality platforms.

In December 2008 Malaysian prime minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, said, "The Government will beef up efforts to promote the country and emphasis will be given to the convention and exhibition sector of the industry."

With the active promotion of Malaysia as a destination for conventions and exhibitions, facilities and infrastructure will improve to meet growing demand. This in turn makes it more viable for MICE businesses to expand their services in Malaysia.

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