

Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce – Code of Conduct under the Competition Ordinance

1. Introduction

1.1 This code sets out the rules and principles of conduct to which Members¹ shall adhere in their dealings in and with the Chamber in order to prevent the infringement of the Competition Ordinance, which comes into force on 14 December 2015. The provisions of this code apply to:

- Any form of interaction, discussion or co-operation between Members, whether in person or otherwise; and
- Any use, disclosure or review of any information which is or may be commercially sensitive information to any Member and which if disclosed to another Member or Members, could distort competition in the relevant market.

2. Golden rules

2.1 This code recognises that, to the extent that Members are competitors, they are prohibited by the Competition Ordinance from undertaking any form of concerted or collusive behaviour, exchanging commercially sensitive information and undertaking or entering into any other behaviour, agreements, arrangements or practices which have as their object or effect the prevention, restriction or distortion of competition.

2.2 The following golden rules should be adhered to at all times by Members and their employees:

- Any form of concerted and collusive behaviour is prohibited – see section 3 below
- Any exchange of commercially sensitive information is prohibited – see section 4
- All meetings held under the auspices of the Chamber must adhere to strict guidelines – see section 5
- All other forms of contact between Members must adhere to these guidelines – see section 6.

2.3 Members should consult their legal departments or the Chamber's secretariat if they are in any doubt as to the permissibility of any conduct or activity.

¹ 'Members' for the purposes of this document shall include; Member Companies and their employees, representatives and agents, service providers, and other individuals attending meetings organised by the Chamber

3. Concerted action

3.1 The Competition Ordinance prohibits any agreements, arrangements or concerted practices between undertakings which may affect trade within Hong Kong and which have as their object or effect the prevention, restriction or distortion of competition.

3.2 Agreements, arrangements or practices that may breach the above prohibition include (but are not limited to) those that:

- directly or indirectly fix purchase or selling prices or other trading terms; or
- limit or control production, markets, technical development or investment; or
- share markets or sources of supply.

3.3 Members must ensure that they and their staff do not discuss with each other or reach any understandings or agreements which aim to regulate:

- prices, terms and conditions of sale
- current or future levels of output or capacity
- costs, profits, margins or market shares
- the sharing or allocation of markets
- distribution and supply practices
- bids, or their intention to bid or not to bid for any contracts or programmes
- selection, retention of and relations with customers or suppliers
- new products, services or product/service innovations
- individual business and sales strategy

4. Exchange of commercially sensitive information

4.1 Competitors should not exchange commercially sensitive information. To do so may constitute a very serious competition law infringement.

4.2 Commercially sensitive information is information that, if disclosed, would give the recipient sufficient confidential and commercial information to allow it to have knowledge of and/or to predict the other party's market behaviour and thus reduce the rivalry and uncertainty which should characterise normal business relations under conditions of competition.

4.3 The table below sets out the type of information that may constitute commercially sensitive information. Exchange or disclosure of the information in the left-hand column is likely to give rise to competition law concerns and should be avoided.

Information exchange which is likely to infringe competition law	Information exchange which is unlikely to infringe competition law
The exchange of any information that relates to the commercial behaviour or competitive position and strategy of a company that a company would not normally disclose to any third party.	The exchange of public domain information, and information which is widely known in the industry.
The exchange of current confidential information that is likely to give the receiving party a competitive advantage.	The exchange of historic information is usually innocuous, but only where the information is sufficiently historic so as not to give an indication of current or future commercial strategy.
The communication of specific information i.e. relating to individual customers or transactions or other information which is very precise.	If the information is in some way general, aggregated or anonymised , it will be more defensible.
<p>The provision of any confidential information relating to pricing is likely to be considered anticompetitive. This extends to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on supply costs or other overhead costs; • Customer-facing costs, discounts or rebates; • Invoicing practices and payment terms; • Margins; • Customer-specific pricing strategy or price levels; • Pricing negotiations; • Current or future pricing trends at the individual level. 	When the information is so historic that it bears no relation to or could give no indication of the current or future commercial and competitive environment or the current or future practices of any party, it is unlikely to give rise to any competition law problems.
The communication of information which relates to business development or strategy decisions (existing or future).	Competition law concerns are unlikely to arise where there is a discussion about industry practices, trends or conditions or general market developments in which no company specific information is disclosed.

5. Conduct of board or other meetings held under the auspices of the Chamber

5.1 General guidance as to the conduct of such meetings is set out in the Notes for Committee Chairs *[attached as an Annex to this Code.]*

6. Conduct of other communications (bilateral telephone calls, emails, faxes and letters) between members

6.1 Commercially sensitive information should not be shared by any means.

6.2 Circulation lists for any emails, faxes or letters should be controlled and consistent.

6.3 Where appropriate (for instance if there is any doubt as to whether information may be deemed commercially sensitive), a lawyer should be asked to review written communications prior to despatch.

6.4 Telephone discussions or email chains should be terminated immediately if any commercially sensitive information or issues are raised.

7. Benchmarking and industry statistics

7.1 From time to time, members may wish to provide data to the Chamber to compile reports on matters of common interest or undertake benchmarking exercises; for example data such as sales, costs or production levels.

7.2 Members should observe the following rules in relation to such data exchanges, reports or benchmarking exercises:

- participants submitting their data must not disclose their individual information to other participants;
- precautions will be taken, if necessary, to ensure the data is disseminated in an aggregated form which does not expressly identify a particular participant and does not permit data applicable to any particular participant to be deduced;
- where benchmarking studies are undertaken precautions will be taken, if necessary, to ensure each participating company is ranked anonymously in the report available to all companies, while confidentially informing each company individually of its actual performance;
- the Chamber will keep individual company data strictly confidential; and
- members may not discuss matters relating to individual company data before, after or at a meeting or any other meeting of the Chamber.

Where necessary, the Chamber and participating members will take legal advice in relation to the setting up and structure of such data exchanges, reports or benchmarking exercises.

Annex: Guidance for committee chairmen on competition issues

Before any meeting:

- Review carefully the contents of any agenda to ascertain whether any information likely to be discussed is commercially sensitive information between any of the participants.
- When finalising an agenda or other materials, ensure that any commercially sensitive information (if disclosure of such information is essential) is anonymised or aggregated to prevent identification.
- Ensure that any reference to minutes of earlier meetings or topics previously discussed is also scrutinised so that specific sensitive information is not disclosed.

During any meeting:

- The agenda must be respected and the meeting should not stray beyond those items listed to be discussed. Always ensure that sensitive information which has been identified is not disclosed or discussed. It may be necessary to hold split meetings or ask certain personnel to leave the room if commercially sensitive issues are discussed.
- A minute should be taken of the meeting recording (i) the identity of the individuals participating in the meeting and (ii) all discussions during the meeting.
- If, despite best efforts, clearly competition-sensitive information is being discussed, stop the meeting and ensure that the minutes contain a record of why it has been stopped.
- If a participant wishes to clarify (for competition law compliance purposes) whether he or she can or cannot discuss a particular topic, or if any participant has any doubts about an issue he or she would like to raise for discussion, discussion of the topic should be deferred to enable participants to consult their legal departments.
- If any participant feels uncomfortable with the information or issues being discussed, he or she should immediately inform the meeting that he or she disagrees with the nature of the discussion, leave the meeting and ask that their departure be recorded in the minutes.
- Report any concerns to the Chamber's secretariat in the first instance.

After any meeting

- Take care that minutes do not contain any commercially sensitive information.