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Expand your borders

But bring the right mind-set for selling overseas, or you could get burned.

TIMOTHY J. GIBBONS

A variety of civic and governmental organizations have been urging more local involvement with international trade for about two years, spurred in part by the impending arrival of trade lanes connecting Jacksonville and Asia.

That push, though, leads to a big question: How do you jump into international waters? How do you take your small business show on the road, selling goods and finding suppliers in other countries?

Going down that path requires mastering a host of new skills, from different ways to handle financial matters to more complicated logistics setups.

First, though, it requires a business owner to look at the world in a certain way, with eyes open for business opportunities.

"It's a thought process," said Jorge Arce, director of the Jacksonville office of the U.S. Commercial Service, which helps companies looking to export. "If you don't have the right mind-set to go international, you shouldn't even get started."

Having such a mind-set has helped a company like JTE Machine Systems Inc. of Orange Park tap into fast-growing markets in other countries.

"One of the things that helps us is we have connections overseas already" because of importing equipment, said Traci Evling, president and chief executive officer of the company. "We see the whole world as an opportunity. We just have to find out where our solutions are going to provide the most economic impact."

That's one reason why some of the strongest proponents of international trade in Jacksonville are the various ethnic chambers of commerce, which start from a basis of international interest.

That mind-set isn't alone isn't enough: For a business to go international, it needs to already have a stable financial base from which to launch.

"Some people have the mind-set of doing international business, but don't have a business," said Arce.

Having a business helps in at least two ways:

- It makes identifying markets easier. It's one thing to say, "I want to sell something overseas," but a very different thing to find out exactly in which markets your particular widget would be welcomed.
- It provides the financial footing required for dealing with more complex - and often more lengthy - transactions.

Having a stable base also helps when making contact with foreign buyers.

"We always go and visit our dealer at least once," said Manish Kothari, whose company, Prism Lighting, sells an inflatable light system in 22 countries. "You have to go and see what he or she is made of: Where is their office? What do people think of them?"

Turnabout, then, is fair play. "Once you start dealing at that level," Kothari said, "you can invite them over and do the reciprocation."

Which leads to the next major step: Figuring out where to sell your product or buy your supplies.

That's the point where governmental or quasi-governmental entities come into play, from federal agencies like the Commercial Service to state organizations like Enterprise Florida (which organizes international trade missions).

Among the resources available are trade leads Enterprise Florida provides on its Web site (www.eflorida.com) and leads and market studies from the federal government at www.export.gov.

With all that in mind, the experts say, you may be ready to start learning how to actually play on the international stage - although even with preparation, it's not necessarily easy.

"A lot of people get burned," said Allen Weber, vice president of Global Trade Institute, a consulting firm that helps larger companies find foreign suppliers and trains smaller companies looking to trade internationally. "The devil is in the details. If you don't know what you're doing, you spend a lot more than if you do."

Which all circles back to that awareness of the world that is necessary to be successful on a global scale.

"There are things you need to be aware of," said Elving, of JTE. "It's understanding business and cultural differences in the way everyday conversation takes place and the way contracts are viewed, knowing how logistics work and how much it costs. If you have experience even just traveling overseas, you see obstacles that many businesses are not aware of."

timothy.gibbons@jacksonville.com, (904) 359-4103