

GOING GLOBAL

Contacts for nothing and advice for free

Canada's trade commissioner service can be just the ticket for small businesses wanting to expand beyond our borders

JON TATTRIE

If you're looking to go global with your Canadian business, you can fork over thousands of dollars to international consultants to help you get set up abroad, or you can get the same services from the government — for free.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade has a worldwide network of consular services that help small and medium-sized businesses get established in the international market.

Caitlin Workman, a spokeswoman for DFAIT, says the Canadian Trade Commissioner Service links businesspeople to its offices in 150 cities around the world to increase success and decrease the costs of doing business.

"It focuses on preparing for international markets, assessing marketing potential, finding qualified contacts and resolving problems," she says.

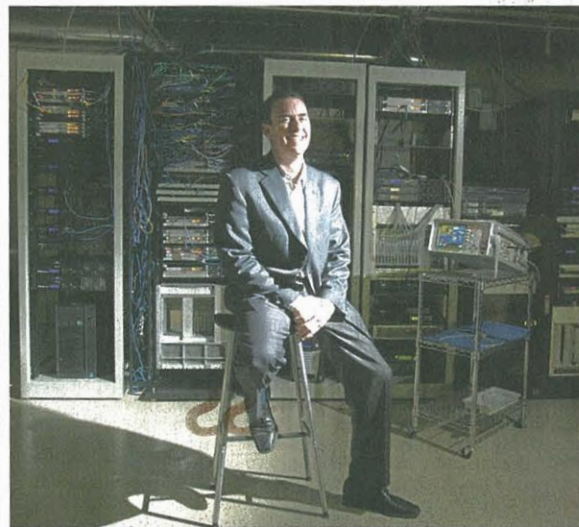
Ms. Workman says DFAIT has up-to-date market information and can outline barriers and regulations problematic in entering particular regions. It also has an eye to the future and can tip off businesses to upcoming opportunities. DFAIT taps businesspeople from its vast array of contacts, potentially saving months of legwork. Contacts may include potential buyers, partners, legal and financial professionals, technology sources, foreign regulatory authorities and foreign investment promotion agencies.

That sort of help has been vital for Montreal's TelcoBridges, which manufactures telecommunications equipment for carriers. It started in 2002 and today, it operates in more than 60 countries. Marc St-Onge, director of sales support, says DFAIT trade commissioners helped his company obtain contacts in new markets, meet potential customers, organize meetings and build the TelcoBridges brand.

A big part of that is attending information and communication technology events, such as CommunicAsia in Singapore, with the



Kalai Kalaichelvan of Eion, a company that has expanded into Africa and India. MICHELLE SIU FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL



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where they're present, are very well-connected with local industry and they are a great help to Canadian companies trying to export," he says. "It's a wonderful service."

DFAIT assistance can also help companies avoid missteps.

Kalai Kalaichelvan, CEO of Eion Wireless, says his company has reached into the Middle East, South America, India and Africa. The company provides the hardware required to start wireless broadband Internet connections.

He says a trade commissioner in South America helped Eion enter the Ecuador market. "He did introduce us to a range of people, right from the service providers to enterprises and some of the bureaucrats within the local government, and also the local people," Mr. Kalaichelvan says. "This gave us confidence that we can do business there. It actually resulted in us deploying real networks in the Amazon jungle."

But when Eion looked at an opportunity in Peru, the local trade commissioner warned Mr. Kalaichelvan it was not a credible project. "We decided not to participate in it and later we did realize, I believe with confirmation, that opportunity did not exist," he says. Without the heads-up, he says, Eion would have likely wasted time and money in a futile effort.

"When you look at the trade commissioners, they don't have any self-interest," he says.

He says Eion's first step in every new market now is to contact the local trade commissioner service.

Ms. Workman says small companies represent 98 per cent of businesses in Canada and employ nearly half of all working Canadians, so helping them grow abroad helps the economy at home. "Trade commissioners develop a first-hand understanding of their clients by meeting with Canadian companies in person, visiting their facilities and following up with aftercare as their business evolves," she says.

assistance of DFAIT, as well as numerous international trade shows. Mr. St-Onge says it's a chance for Canadian companies like his to showcase their products to a targeted executive audience. "It's helped develop brand awareness and uncover leads and potential projects for a fraction of the cost that it would take us if we did it alone," he says.

The trade commissioner service in Brazil introduced TelcoBridges to a potential partner called Khomp three years ago. "Since that introduction we have gone on to partner with this Brazilian company and they have gone on to distribute our products. It's quite a success," Mr. St-Onge says.

TelcoBridges's Latin American advances have been strengthened in recent months by a series of meetings with prospects facilitated by the trade commissioner service in Mexico City. "I find the Canadian trade commissioners, in just about any country

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