

Flow Sciences Concentrates on Narrowing Its Focus

ExporTech Graduate Turns Lessons Learned Into Export Sales

When the whole wide world beckons, it's easy to flit from one country to another as a possible marketplace, especially when trade shows are held in exotic locations. With leads coming from all corners of the globe, but not the resources to cover all those places, it is easy to lose focus. The executive leadership of Flow Sciences fell into this trap, with the result of scattered global sales without the proper local control.

At ExporTech, a program for companies who want to export taught by exporting experts, they learned to focus. Steve Janz, vice president for marketing and business development, and James Wind, chief financial officer, recently discussed how international sales increased \$372,000 in 2010 as a direct result of attending ExporTech a year earlier.

“ExporTech allowed us to achieve by helping the senior leadership team select where to focus in the world,” Janz said. Flow Sciences leadership decided to focus their marketing effort in Asia with Singapore selected as their gateway country. Gateways were another ExporTech concept.

Flow Sciences, located outside Wilmington, manufactures highly customized and complex enclosures of varying sizes for the pharmaceutical and nanotechnology industry to provide safety environments that allow work to be done in tightly controlled temperature, humidity and aseptic working conditions, while protecting personnel from exposure to toxic materials.

Some of the smaller units can be made in a couple of days, while a room-sized version may take six months. Flow Sciences has captured 40 percent of the North American market, which provided one incentive for looking abroad.

Another reason came from their customers. Pharmaceutical companies were globalizing for a variety of reasons. “Flow Sciences is frequently asked to export to multinational sites of US based companies,” Wind said.

ExporTech

ExporTech offers export assistance from state and federal agencies to small and mid-size manufacturers. ExporTech uses the combined expertise of the Industrial Extension Service at NC State University, which is the state agency for the federal Manufacturing Extension Partnership; and both the state and federal Departments of Commerce divisions devoted to exports, including the Small Business Technology and Development Centers, District Export Councils and the US Commercial Service.

When Wind gave a talk about their experience with ExporTech, one slide listed 10 names of individuals from these agencies who helped them along the way – including when they got to foreign shores. Flow Sciences joined the Ex-Im Bank, part of the US Department of Commerce, which provides them with the security and credibility of the US government with foreign customers.

They also learned from other companies going through the ExporTech experience with them. For example, Janz said they had depended on trade shows to develop their leads, but learned the value of search engine optimization and videos to promote understanding of their highly sophisticated products. Now, most of their non-USA leads come from the web where videos provide concise demonstrations of their products' capabilities.

Focus

A network of master distributors follows through on the leads. And when a lead comes in from a country without a distributor to sell and service their products, Flow Sciences sometimes has to say, "No, thanks." This goes against their company culture of saying yes to all customers, Janz said, but it comes with the realization that until they're prepared to sell in a particular country, it's best to let it go – for now! Janz maintains contact with the most promising of these leads that didn't work out, because if enough interest is shown in a particular location, Flow Sciences will consider growing the support network in that market.

It boils down to FOCUS, as Wind noted on a slide. In ExporTech, participants focus on gateways, or what select countries and strategic partners will provide the biggest bang for the buck. Flow Sciences continues to develop gateway countries that provide access to a region; for example, Singapore to Southeast Asia.

"ExporTech allowed the management team to get out of the office, take a breath, and re-focus," Wind said. Other companies should do the same. The world awaits.