

Learning the ins and outs of exporting

The Northwoods River News

By Kyle Rogers Reporter/Photographer

4/13/2013

<http://www.rivernewsonline.com/main.asp?SectionID=4&SubSectionID=309&ArticleID=56534>

Business is going well for Greg Smith, owner of Tomahawk Live Trap. He has 22 employees and has been offering plenty of overtime to keep up with the demand for his various animal trapping products. Sales for the first three months of 2013 were up 25 percent. But like any good entrepreneur, Smith is always looking for an opportunity to expand. He'd like to gain a larger presence in the international market, which currently is about 10 percent of his total sales.

"I feel good about our success and I'm ready to expand overseas," Smith said.

That's where ExporTech comes in. The nationally-developed program that aims to help businesses develop an export plan is currently making its first appearance in the Northwoods. Wednesday, representatives from three different businesses gathered at Nicolet College's Rhinelander campus for the second of the program's three intensive day-long sessions. The third session is scheduled for May 1.

The Northwest Manufacturing Outreach Center based at UW-Stout offers the program in this region of the state. The center partnered with the Grow North Regional Economic Development Corporation and Nicolet College to bring the program to Rhinelander. It can cater to as many as eight businesses. Tomahawk Live Trap, Multi-Tech North America and Cleereman Industries are participating in the current program, which does require a time and financial investment. The fee is \$5,000 per company, but scholarships are available that can bring the fee down to \$2,500.

But the idea is that the investment will be well worth it after businesses use what they take away from the program to significantly increase their international sales.

Joni Geroux, who coordinates the program for the Northwest Manufacturing Outreach Center, said follow-up surveys have revealed sales increases as high as \$500,000 in the first six months after businesses complete the program. Geroux said those have been the findings in the southeastern part of the state from ExporTech programs hosted by another manufacturing organization.

Geroux's group has only recently started rolling out the ExporTech program in the northern part of the state. The first one was held last spring in Wausau. Another one was held in Eau Claire in fall 2012. Geroux said they will next hold the program in La Crosse this coming fall.

"The outcome of this is (businesses) walk out with an executable exporting plan," Geroux said. "The program is targeted toward those businesses new to exporting, or those who

have only dabbled, or anyone who needs a specific plan. Some businesses just take random requests (from international customers). Here they learn how to target their markets."

Through a series of presentations as well as one-on-one sessions over the course of the three-month program, businesses learn about resources they may not have been aware of and are assisted in developing an exporting plan tailored for their product niche.

Each business participant also has a coach who guides them through the entire program, and even works with them during the weeks in between the scheduled sessions. At Nicolet College on Wednesday, the three businesses had an opportunity to review the results of market research analysis UW-Eau Claire students did for them since the first session on March 6.

"The goal was to identify two or three top countries that make the most sense for them to expand into," Geroux said.

Sandy Bishop, director of Workforce Development at Nicolet College, emphasized the collaboration among Nicolet, Grow North and the manufacturing outreach center that has allowed the ExporTech program to come to the Northwoods.

"It's intense and high-caliber and we're able to offer it in northern Wisconsin because of our collaboration," Bishop said. "We're fortunate to have all these entities working together in northern Wisconsin so we can bring resources here."

Wednesday afternoon, Smith had only completed about half of the program, but he is already excited about how what he is learning will translate into future growth for his live trap business.

"This has enlightened me on how to go about (exporting) and the resources that are available," Smith said, noting that he would have likely wasted money on ineffective methods if he had tried to tackle exporting completely on his own.

"I just want to go about it the right way," Smith said. "I think a lot of businesses want to do more internationally but they don't know how to do it. As a business owner, I'm always looking to expand. Rather than throwing darts (at possible solutions), I thought I'd go in, get educated and go about it in a professional way that will be the most effective. This class wasn't cheap, but hopefully the return will be tremendous. I would recommend it to anybody."

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