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TRADE Without Travel

Virtual trade missions enable participants to have face-time with business partners while avoiding jet lag.

by Alison MacAlpine

Before Carol Blakey boards a plane and crosses 15 time zones to sell environmental equipment for her clients, she wants to be sure the trip will pay off. Blakey, 50, is the president (and only full-time employee) of Cheiron Resources Ltd., a Calgary-based international distributor of oil-screening test kits that detect toxins in soil, in water and on solid surfaces. But when she was invited to participate in Canada's first "virtual trade mission" (VTM) for women entrepreneurs, she was skeptical.

It was 1998 and the VTM was being organized by the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, an independent, not-for-profit think-tank on Canadian-Asian relations. The two-month mission coordinated by the CanAsian Businesswomen's Network was going to use technology — including the Internet and videoconferencing — to introduce Canadian businesswomen to businesswomen in Malaysia. A cutting-edge concept, but Blakey hesitated. "There weren't a lot of women in that demographic group who were going to be customers for me," she says. And, in fact, the VTM didn't result in any contracts for Blakey — though among the 58 participants, 11 deals were signed. She did, however, gain valuable industry intelligence — specifically, learning that the Malaysian government was subsidizing environmental projects involving local companies.

"What we always stress with virtual trade missions is that you're not necessarily going to make a sale. It's about people making partnerships or alliances," says Candice Rice, a trade commissioner with Industry Canada and President of the Ontario Chapter of Women in International Trade (WITO) in Toronto.

Rice is coordinating a VTM between Canada and Australia this spring on behalf of WITO. For a mini-

mal investment (in this case \$50 for members and \$75 for non-members), participants get password-protected access to a dedicated web site where they can chat with other participants and access export-related tips from the comfort of their own offices.

The main event is a series of two videoconferences, in which participants gather around a boardroom table to present their case to a camera that beams their close-ups across the globe. Most participants quickly get beyond the initial weirdness of talking to a camera and, where necessary, speaking through translators.

The virtual Canadian-Australian mission goes real-time in October 2003, when Australian participants may travel to meet their counterparts in Vancouver and Toronto as part of the Global Banking Alliance for Women conference. Such personalized follow-up is critical, according to Lynn Grittani, Senior Media Relations Officer for Toronto-based Ontario Exports Inc., the export development agency of the Ontario government.

Through Virtual Team Ontario, Ontario Exports Inc. organizes six to eight geographic and industry sector-specific VTMs each year for Ontario-based small and medium-sized companies. Grittani says virtual trade missions are "a cost-effective way for companies to take that first step, meet with potential business partners, and learn more about an export market."

Online limitations aside, Blakey has become a major advocate of VTMs since her Canadian-Malaysian experience five years ago: "When you go on a normal trade mission, it's kind of like flying blind. By the time I've gone on a virtual trade mission, I know whether I want to get on that plane." ■

For more information on VTMs, contact:

Department of Foreign Affairs
and International Trade (DFAIT)
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