

Greasing the Wheels of Exporting: Petrochem, Inc. Takes on the World

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Petrochem, Inc. Management Team: President Carole Sluski (center top) with Vice President Jill Dohner (Bottom Left). Office Manager Paulette MacCabee (Bottom Right), CFO Dennis Sluski (top left) and Sales Manager James Stevick.

Mother-daughter team Carole Sluski and Jill Dohner have spent the last three years turning their Lockport, Illinois company Petrochem into a successful exporter. Petrochem manufactures and distributes a variety of lubricants for the food, transportation and energy industries. Internationally the firm is best known for HT-2000, a unique oven chain lubricant developed by Carole Sluski and used by large commercial bakeries in the United States and exported to bakeries across the world from Argentina to New Zealand.

Sluski believes that a new product she is introducing, UltraGard which is an extreme pressure lubricant used in environmentally sensitive areas such as water treatment ponds, offshore drilling sights, dredging operations and other areas will become another hot export product. The advantage of UltraGard she explains is that unlike other lubricants, it is totally water-soluble and eliminates a “sheen” on the water surface or bioconcentrate as “sludge” under water. This stops water contamination and the threat of fines that companies might incur.

Sluski turned to the U.S. Commercial Service last year for assistance expanding Petrochem’s international markets. The U.S. Commercial Service is a Commerce Department agency that helps U.S. companies, particularly small and medium-size businesses, succeed in global markets. The agency has a network of more than 100 offices across the U.S., including the U.S. Export Assistance Center in Chicago where Sluski participated in an export-training course. The course, part of the U.S. Commercial Service’s Global Diversity Initiative, trains women- and minority-owned businesses on exporting strategies. This includes legal and documentation issues, the Internet as a business tool, and the mechanics of exporting. This training helped Petrochem build a successful export business with a key cornerstone: confidence.

Sluski emphasizes the importance of relationship building in growing a successful export business. Her skill in building strong relationships has helped her establish long-term distributor contracts, create an international buzz about her products, and successfully network at industry events. Such relationships do not simply pop up, but rather grow from confidence between business partners.

For many young firms, unfortunately, such confidence is difficult to cultivate because of limited track records. To counter this challenge, Sluski shows potential partners her certificate of completion for the U.S. Commercial Service’s export training program. For potential partners, the completion of a comprehensive government export training program shows that the firm is serious and knowledgeable about international trade. Of the training, Sluski says, “It was so beneficial because it not only gave me confidence, it also gives my customers confidence.”

Sluski’s training program concluded with a trade mission to Mexico, one of the top export markets for small U.S. businesses. Commercial Service specialists in Mexico arranged ten meetings with pre-qualified potential distributors, representatives and buyers; an interpreter was provided to facilitate deals. The U.S. Commercial Service also provided market research to identify best contacts, brochures in Spanish, and a VIP reception to meet with top executives and Mexican government officials. Through the event’s networking opportunities, Petrochem is presently establishing an exclusive distributor agreement with a Mexican firm for their own private label of U.S. manufactured lubricant products.

Looking towards the future, Sluski says that in a few years her daughter Jill will take over the firm, while she will stay on in a consulting role. The firm will continue to utilize the resources that the U.S. Commercial Service provides, both for the knowledge it supplies Petrochem, as well as the confidence it creates among partners.