

Small firm big on international stage

A small Ontario firm of urban planners and designers has found that flexibility and an open mind can translate into success in the international marketplace.

When the Planning Partnership was introduced to a visiting delegation of Russians by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) International, the rapport was almost immediate. Now the firm is designing a subdivision in Siberia that will eventually be home to 24,000 residents.



The Canadians have landed: Philip Weinstein (centre) and Rick Merrill (right), partners with The Planning Partnership, were in Siberia to design a subdivision.

The Russians liked the hands-on approach by the six partners of the firm, especially the new urbanism principles—focusing on people-friendly development—that inspired the company's work.

The firm prepares plans, designs and studies related to new communities, waterfronts, parks, downtown revitalization and industrial areas in Canada, the U.S., China and Russia.

International work is only about 10% of the company's business, but it's growing.

Rick Merrill, partner with the company, says the Russian private sector group that retained his firm has been flexible and open to new ideas. The Russians were, for example, reluctant to plan for north-facing houses because of the cold, but Merrill's firm was able to demonstrate that houses can be designed to minimize the effects through vestibules and other design elements.

Conversely, the Russians asked for saunas (or banyas) to be included in most of the designs—a traditional feature of their homes. The Canadian firm accommodated the request. Merrill's advice for other firms doing business internationally is to demonstrate that kind of flexibility too.

"Get a sense of how they work, listen very carefully to their objectives and adapt to the local culture, because the worst thing you can do is try to export Canada."

CMHC International has been helpful in introducing the Planning Partnership to the right contacts, and even helped to vet Russian-language contracts with the help of a Russian-speaking representative. Merrill says it's an important lesson learned in conducting business with different cultures.

"It's important to get assistance and advice, particularly in contracts and negotiations," he says.

Sanjar Farzaneh, Team Leader at CMHC International, says the Planning Partnership can serve as a model for other small Canadian firms.

"It's a great example of a small company succeeding in an international market," he says. "The Planning Partnership is very efficient and effective so it was no surprise to us that, once introduced, the two were a perfect match."

For more information, see www.cmhc.ca and www.planpart.ca.

Shampoo venture brings jobs, hope to Afghanistan

For most small Canadian companies, the thought of doing business in war-torn Afghanistan may seem incongruous, but not for Druide International Inc. The Montreal-based company has teamed up with an Afghan business to open a shampoo factory in Kabul. The project may be small, but its early success has many hoping it is a sign of things to come.

Opened last November, the shampoo manufacturing facility is a joint venture between Afghan businessman Waheed Daqeeq and Druide, a company that specializes in environmentally friendly skin and hair products.

The venture was facilitated by Paul Desjarlais of Interpôles, a Montreal-based consulting firm that assists Canadian companies in mounting joint projects with foreign companies, largely in Asia.

"I was approached by an Afghan-Canadian who invited me to travel to Kabul to look for joint-venture opportunities. As an international development advisor, I had worked in Indonesia building affordable houses but after meeting Waheed Daqeeq, the first project to take shape was a shampoo factory instead."

When asked how Desjarlais managed to help set up a factory in a country at war, it's clear he saw opportunity where many would not have.

Where there's a market, there's a way

"The entire country needs to be rebuilt. In 2002, there were virtually no production plants. Even today, nearly all of Afghanistan's consumer goods like soaps, clothing, shoes, candy, soft drinks and other everyday items, are imported from neighbouring countries. Even though a large portion of Afghans are poor, they are still consumers."

Desjarlais says that, to his knowledge, all shampoo in Afghanistan is currently imported from Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, which makes the products more expensive.

"Because of the large water content in shampoo, this amounts to the transport of bottled water across borders, which greatly inflates prices in Afghanistan. So we think that prices of locally produced shampoo will be highly competitive," he says.

Locally produced products also mean jobs for Afghans. The facility, which produces a brand of shampoo called Florance,



The Canadian-Afghan shampoo joint venture has hired Afghan war widows, most of whom are the sole income earners in their families.

currently employs twelve widowed Afghan women and four men. Eventually, the factory aims to employ some 40 women.

"We had asked our Afghan partner at the outset if he would agree to the employees being women, preferably war widows," says Desjarlais. "He said yes and kept his word even though he lives in a very traditional setting. These women live for the most part in the neighbourhood, they have children and they are the sole income earners in their family."

Desjarlais adds that while most of the women work in bottling, the laboratory is run by a female chemist and the accounting is also done by a woman.

The factory mixes shampoo ingredients based on quality-controlled procedures and produces 4,000 units per day in recyclable plastic bottles for distribution across Afghanistan.

Desjarlais says that the challenges run deep.

"The country's infrastructure is practically non-existent after all these years of war, so raw materials have to be imported. Also, the literacy rate is very low, so training needs are greater."

But in this area, the Government of Canada has a role to play.

"The Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) Industrial Cooperation Program contributed to the viability study that we first did," says Desjarlais. "Then, during set-up, it participated in the training, coaching and technical transfer phase. It goes without saying that this help was highly appreciated given the difficulties we feared."

"I am delighted that Druide, with the assistance Interpôles and the Government of Canada, has opened its doors to the emerging Afghan market," says David Sproule, Canadian Ambassador to Afghanistan. "This venture supports many of the

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