

CHERYL CORNACCHIA
The Gazette

Robin Saunders isn't waiting for the phone to ring, she's making the calls. Unlike most of the other businesswomen on the trade mission, Saunders came home from Washington with a deal.

While most of the female entrepreneurs were in how-to workshops, Saunders, 46, was signing, in the same Washington hotel, a \$7-million-a-year contract with one of the world's paper giants, Chicago-based Stone Container Corp.

Her small Hemmingford company, North American Speciality Papers, will now market and sell Stone paper products in Greenland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Ghana.

The deal — one of six finalized during the four-day mission — was held up as an example of how small and medium-sized businesses led by women can make it south of the border.

But to be fair, Saunders said she has been courting Stone for years.

Her company represents several Quebec mills, including Uniforêt Tri-pap in Trois-Rivières and Quebec City's Daishowa, and imports and exports newsprint, container board, security papers, writing papers, lottery tickets and other paper grades.

She explained when new shipping lines opened up out of Halifax 2½ years ago, Canadian paper products became more internationally competitive and that opened up the possibility of expanding in overseas markets.

Saunders said when she realized the opportunity she requested market information from Canadian commercial officers in Iceland, Greenland and some other places — "They were great" — and then she got even busier.

She began courting customers there, traveling to Iceland three times in the past 18 months, meeting customers face-to-face, competing in local tenders and improving her knowledge and profile in the market.

Joëlle Montpetit is in trucking; Jeanne Ritter distributes Canadian movies and TV programs; and Robin Saunders's line is paper. But last month in Washington, all three were talking as if they were in the same business — and they were.

The businesswomen were three of 125 female entrepreneurs, 24 of them from Quebec, who packed their power suits, left their families behind and joined a four-day federal government trade mission to the U.S. capital. Their goal was to find American customers.

The mission, led by federal International Trade Minister Sergio Marchi and organized by the Canadian embassy in Washington, was designed to boost small and medium-sized businesses here at home.

It was Canada's first all-woman trade mission any-

"Every time we went, we tried to expand our market into different grades of paper," she said.

Before her recent deal with Stone, her company had won a tender to supply Quebec paper for the Icelandic white pages, sold newsprint to the major daily paper in Reykjavik and began studying the Icelandic fish industry, a potentially huge customer of Quebec packaging.

She has learned about the culture there, how they do business and, basically, what is what. "On my first trip, I woke up in my hotel room at 3 a.m. and was panic-stricken that I had missed my 8 a.m. meeting. They have 24 hours of sun in April."

Now North American is a known commodity in Iceland and the surrounding region and as a result, she said, it was no surprise Stone would reward her company with their business there.

"In the realm of paper, a big company like Stone will watch you in the market for four or five years," she explained. "If you prove yourself, only then will they talk a deal."

Saunders is a businesswoman of 20 years, a mother of two grown daughters, a former college professor and an American by birth. She moved to Canada from Philadelphia 5½ years ago when she met and fell in love with a French-Canadian businessman in the paper industry.

where and *The Gazette's* Woman News section was there as the women networked like honeybees, power-lunched like there was no tomorrow and made sales pitches at every turn.

Throughout the four-day mission, we kept an eye on the Quebec delegation, a diverse group of women marketing everything from fish-skin leathers to computer software, jewelry and immigration expertise.

But to evaluate the mission and its success, we followed three women more closely: Robin Saunders, president of North American Speciality Papers Inc. in Hemmingford; Jeanne Ritter, owner of Domino Film and Television Ltd. in Montreal; and Joëlle Montpetit, owner of Transpotech Consultant Inc. in Saint-Eustache.

We checked in with them again last week.

But Ritter's company is small and her hope was to expand her business into the U.S.

To that end, wherever she went in Washington she left videos of two new feature films that her company has ready for release and a catalogue of all the other motion pictures and television programs her company has for sale.

And, now, she is waiting.

"It's hard to say what will happen until they look at my pictures," she said. "It's not the same thing as when you have a product they can see right there and then."

Admittedly, she was not alone in those try-to-make-a-deal sessions. Two other Canadian businesswomen were also in the meetings with PBS and CPB. But thanks to a frank discussion in the cab on the way to the CPB offices, they came to an agreement on the order and length of their presentations.

"I did this once before, and the first person who talked stole the whole meeting," Ritter said.

This time around, she had a chance to sell her company and came away anything but empty-handed.

She learned how to apply to CPB for co-production — "their protocols keep changing" — and how PBS is opening up new services, including an international 24-hour children's channel.

"That's important, she said. "You don't make deals the first time around. You have to learn where their interests lie."

Since moving, she has worked long and hard establishing her own company north of the border, and she says, her recent deal is sweet payback.

"We're one of the small fish in the sea who gets the contract nobody looks at," said Saunders of her latest deal. "But those contracts," she quickly added, "make a huge difference to us."



It could take another month before Jeanne Ritter hears anything back from Washington, but the Montreal film distributor is optimistic.

It was the first time she was part of a trade mission, and while in Washington she saw executives of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and a vice-president of PBS, the Public Broadcasting System.

She was so busy making contacts and networking with the other Canadian women on the mission, she even missed one meeting the Canadian embassy had set up for her, and she cut short another when it became evident the American firm was trying to sell to her, not buy from her.

Ritter's company is Domino Film and Television Ltd. The company — run out of her N.D.G. home — sells Canadian feature films and television programs to broadcast clients across Canada and abroad. Domino's foreign sales have included deals with broadcasters in France, the U.S., Japan, Britain and Europe.