

Montreal Forensic Company Takes First Shot at South African Market

It took Forensic Technology WAI Inc. a solid three years, and a little bit of government help, before breaking into the tough but rewarding South African market.

This was the 100-per-cent export-based company's first contract in this part of the world and its largest contract outside of the United States.

Forensic's unique Integrated Ballistic Identification System (IBIS) captures and analyzes data on bullets and guns used in crimes, allowing law enforcement agencies to quickly and easily match guns with bullets, and crimes with perpetrators.

"Our IBIS has already helped match over 200 cases in New York City, our largest single-city installation," says Forensic Communications Manager Donna McLean. "And we have matched the same number of guns with bullets in Pretoria in the four months we've been there."

A unique product

Forensic's parent engineering consulting company, Walsh Automation, had been active in South Africa 10 years ago, so Forensic had no problem finding a local representative.

"Enlisting such a rep is critical in helping small companies like ours (35 people) navigate through local customs and language difficulties," McLean explains. "At the user level, South Africans speak Afrikaans,

although government officials speak English."

Still, it took Forensic three years of hard work and all the help it could get to beat out its main U.S. rival.

"The South Africans had met us and our competitor at a specialized trade show in the U.S.," McLean recalls. "They requested proposal after proposal, as well as a local testing facility, set up at our expense, which in the end contributed to clinching the deal for us.

"It was an expensive exercise," she recalls, "but that's how the customer found out that our product is superior, although a little pricier. It can match not only cartridge cases but also the bullets themselves."

Some unique help

"The South Africans are technically very savvy," says McLean, "so you have to be well prepared in your submissions and rely on the guidance of your local rep."

In addition, the young company, founded in 1990, received excellent support from the Canadian Trade Office in Johannesburg and the Canadian High Commission in Pretoria.

"Trade Commissioner Ron Hoffman was there to provide official Canadian backing to our bid — which carries much weight in military and police circles in South Africa," says McLean. "Then there was the presence of Ambassador Arthur Perron, who represented the Canadian Commercial Corporation (CCC) at the contract signing ceremony."

The CCC in fact enhanced Forensic's credibility and gave it a competitive advantage, with the guarantee of contract performance and securing better payment terms. With insurance provided by Export Development Corporation, it was a truly Canadian team effort.

"All this help is much appreciated," says McLean, "and it was much needed because most governments don't move quickly, and we had to have extra negotiating sessions to iron out the whole question of taxes, customs and duties, which can be significant."

Future prospects

McLean is confident that Forensic's \$4.4-million contract with the South African police service's four existing

Continued on page 7 — Forensic



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