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This wasn't your usual trade mission -- it was serious stuff!

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A group of skeptical Calgary entrepreneurs trudged off to Washington earlier this month as members of Canada's first-ever women-only trade mission to the U.S.

They weren't expecting much.

As true individualists, they regard with suspicion any initiative by government, including this mission led by International Trade Minister Sergio Marchi and a posse of federal bureaucrats.

Boy, were they surprised.

"We have to tell you how exciting this was," says Arlene Flock, bursting with more enthusiasm than usual. "The minister, Sergio Marchi, didn't just show up. He was with us for the whole three days. Can you imagine?"

Flock, who owns Flag Works, and her newly appointed director of marketing and export, Bev Durvin, were joined by six other Calgary women on the junket.

Altogether, there were about 100 women with the strongest representation from, guess where, Ontario.

"I went in saying, 'OK, here we go again,'" Flock says, recalling other trade missions she's been on where little was accomplished.

"I've been on 'junkets.' This was not just a junket.

"They listened, they heard. They're very serious about this initiative; they're committed to international trade."

Durvin is the former owner of Benkris & Co., the award-winning kitchenware company that declared bankruptcy earlier this year. She joined Flag Works a few months ago and shared Flock's skepticism prior to the mission.

Not anymore. Durvin was impressed by the department's goal setting -- "just like private industry." Results of the mission are being measured on a point system based on export deals done. They even have a barometer in the Canadian embassy office in Washington to keep track, Durvin says.

"They brought all the big guns in. The whole thing was beyond my expectation -- the professionalism, the knowledge, the giving."

Flag Works was the only firm to have two representatives on the mission.

"We separated our duties. It was very entrepreneurial," says Durvin.

She attended all "technical functions" -- the myriad of seminars on such topics as Managing the U.S. Business Culture and Legal Issues for Success in Today's Global Marketplace. The seminars were short and to the point, yielding names of people, places and institutions to target for further information.

Flock did the "cerebral" thing, according to Durvin. She met with the Canadian consuls from five cities -- Detroit, Boston, New York, Chicago and Washington.

The whole experience "reduced our learning curve by a year," says Flock. Flag Works, which until now has exported less than one per cent of its production, will have an export strategy in place by month end and will be putting it into action by February, she says.

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