

"If you come to the table prepared, your exporting relationship will begin."

SONJA PEROVIC

SONJA PEROVIC, President

LOOPMEDIA INC.

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Year Established: 1995

Employees: 13

Years Exporting: 3

Exports Sales: 45%

Export Market: U.S.



Business Description: Loopmedia provides animation design and branding solutions – from concept through to project management – for film, television, advertising and new media industries. Celebrating its 10th year, Loopmedia has built a solid reputation through award-winning designs and long-term relationships with clients including media giants and leading advertisers. The firm also gives back to the community by raising awareness for issues like AIDS prevention and ovarian cancer.

For Sonja Perovic, building a successful export business is all about developing relationships. That means plenty of networking, particularly at industry events. "You never know where your next piece of business will come from," she says, recalling that she met her biggest client to date at a New York conference, after she complimented the woman on a particularly beautiful shirt. "Had I not attended that conference and mentioned that shirt, I wouldn't have expanded my business by 25%!" she laughs.

"Design drives branding, and good design transcends borders," explains Sonja. "We knew that to compete effectively we needed to expand our efforts to other markets." Loopmedia initially targeted large New York and Chicago ad agencies, drawing upon Canada's Trade Commissioner Service to explore ideas and to compile lists of prospects. Loopmedia's sales team then systematically broke down the lists and solicited one-on-one meetings by making phone calls and attending conferences. This strategy has been so successful that Loopmedia has grown its U.S. exports to almost half of its business in three short years.

PREFERS DIRECT SALES

Sonja has preferred to break into the U.S. using her own sales team, a team that clearly understands Loopmedia's services and brand. "With the Internet and the development of ftp sites, it doesn't really matter where you are physically located."

As a matter of fact, Loopmedia's website has proven to be "an amazing tool in generating new business," Sonja notes. "I think that a company without a web site is really losing out. It legitimizes you, gives prospective clients easy access to see what you do and serves as a conversation starter in the sales process."

CHINA ON THE HORIZON

While Loopmedia's primary focus remains North America, Sonja has her sights set on China and is approaching it in the same methodical way as she did the U.S. – starting with solid research. That means attending seminars on doing business there, seeking the advice of trade commissioners, devising a market entry strategy and sourcing a potential partner with local experience.

"China is a huge market, so to ignore it would be foolish," insists Sonja. "We're gearing up for it, but we have to find the right niche before jumping in." She has some novel ideas... "but I'm still doing my homework!"

Lessons Learned

DOING BUSINESS IN THE U.S.

Although Canada and the U.S. share a common language and border, there are subtle cultural differences that can affect your success in doing business there, particularly if you are a service-based business. Sonja Perovic shares these insights and tips:

- **Do your research.** Look at how you can add value to the revenue stream of a potential U.S. client and how you can be a partner rather than a supplier and cost centre. "That strategy has worked for us because we become part of the team, which builds loyalty and relationships."
- **Target properly.** "Take your time. Target one customer at a time when you're first starting out, being very clear on the outcome you want, and this will lead to other things. If you come to the table prepared, your exporting relationship will begin."
- **Be American-ready.** Ensure you can offer quality and the ability to deal with distances and tight deadlines. "Clients are looking for quality and service. You have to deliver on both."
- **Always deal in U.S. currency.** "We never quote in Canadian dollars and we position ourselves in the mid to high price range because Americans look for quality, not bargains."
- **Join associations.** A member of the Organization of Women in International Trade (www.owit-toronto.ca), Sonja finds that such groups help in raising her understanding of the nuances of doing business with our U.S. neighbours. "Trade associations can be invaluable sources of information."

"Plot your moves carefully and take calculated risk."

LESLEY RUST

LESLEY RUST, President

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Year Established: 1973

Employees: 26

Years Exporting: 20+

Exports Sales: 90%

Export Market: 70 countries, including Asia, Europe, the Middle East and the U.S.



Business Description: A world leader in explosives ordnance disposal (EOD) technology, Proparms designs and manufactures anti-terrorist equipment for police and military clients to use in soft-package bomb disposal. Its range of water disrupters, which fire a jet of water to disarm explosives, can be used on land and underwater, mounted on robots and for some kinds of anti-personnel mines. Its latest product, developed with a retired New York City Bomb Squad member, is the Remote Entry Device (RED) – designed to gain access into the trunks of suspicious vehicles and the cargo area of vans and trucks.

The daughter and sister of police officers, Lesley Rust was born in the U.K. but spent her early career in the theatre in Montreal, both as a company manager and props manager. Here she met her future husband – Josef Elsener – a renowned armourer with Sureté du Québec, the province's police force. He was an expert witness in weaponry-related trials whose family invented the Swiss Army Knife.

Although maintaining "I knew nothing about guns," Lesley identified a niche and, along with Josef, initially founded Proparms in 1973 as a supplier of special effects and specialized props, including weaponry, to the Canadian film industry. It moved into soft package bomb disposal when approached by Sureté du Québec, which was searching for a reliable bomb disrupter.

Lesley launched the new company, spearheading the marketing, with Josef focusing on design until a serious illness and his eventual death in 2002 left her alone at the helm. Undaunted, she has more than doubled her employee size since then and actively pursued partnerships.

WORLD LEADER

Proparms is only one of a handful of companies worldwide specializing in EOD disrupter technology. What sets it apart is its commitment to quality (it is ISO certified) and to safety. "And as a small company in a world where Canada is a flea on the side of an elephant, we can be more flexible and conduct R&D and get product to market more quickly."

The road to international growth was a natural one for Proparms. "You cannot survive as a Canadian company in this highly-specialized field by doing business only in North America. You need to think globally." Along the way, she has attended many conferences and trade shows and accessed support from Canadian Embassies and trade commissioners around the world and from the Industrial Research Assistance Program (IRAP), Idea-SME and the RCMP.

GENDER NO BARRIER

Although she is one of very few women in this industry, Lesley has not found her gender to be a barrier. "The soft sell can be very effective," she maintains, encouraging other women not to be intimidated by male-dominated, technical fields. "Just ask lots of questions." Her motto? "I'm not superior but I'm everyone's equal. If you remember that, the sky's the limit!"

Lesley's best advice to others expanding internationally is to have a good export plan and pursue growth prudently. "Like a good chess player, plot your moves carefully and take calculated risk."

Lessons Learned

SOURCING AGENTS WORLDWIDE

With the bulk of Proparms sales from exports, it relies heavily on agents around the world to sell its products. Here are Lesley Rust's tips for finding and retaining reliable agents who are not just "super-slick salespeople":

- **Use Canada's trade commissioners abroad.** "The Canadian Embassy is great. We always keep in contact, and advise them of any problems we have with agents."
- **Attend industry events.** "By attending conferences for bomb technicians and demonstrating our equipment at trade shows, we've been able to find knowledgeable reps."
- **Share agents.** Lesley cooperates with related Canadian companies, like Allen Vanguard and Med-Eng. Systems Inc., sharing agents and even marketing together. And finding agents who can represent you in more than one market is helpful and can cut down on your travel costs to train new people.
- **Ensure ongoing communication.** Along with solid training for agents, Proparms publishes a newsletter which keeps its agents abreast of the latest developments.