

P.E.I. Firm Takes Road to Exports... with Polish Deal

Getting into the information technology business in Prince Edward Island is not the easiest thing in the world, let alone launching into exports. But this is what Charlottetown-based CIE Research Inc. has managed to do thanks to some key government help.

It started 10 years ago when CIE President Archie Banks saw an opportunity to develop a new generation of electronic signs based on an architecture capable of handling high-speed switching between a computer processor and LEDs (light-emitting diodes).

"The focus of my efforts to improve sending images to jumbo screens and display units was not so much on the LEDs themselves," says Banks, "but the way in which the electronic images are controlled."

From prototype to prototype — all progressively more sophisticated — Banks turned to outside technical expertise to bring his concept to commercial standards, working with Applied Microelectronics Inc. (AMI) of Halifax, for electronic and software engineering.

From first contract to first export market

In 1993, CIE won a contract for a large, three-sided electronic marquee sign — its manufacture was subcontracted to NewTech Instruments of St. John's, Newfoundland, a Bell Canada electronics production facility — for the Confederation Centre of the Arts in Charlottetown.

In the meantime, the P.E.I. Government was also following the fledgling company's potential. "As a matter of fact," says Banks, "that's how we became aware of opportunities in Poland, our first export market, through Steve Murray, Director, International Trade at Enterprise P.E.I. — the provincial Crown agency dealing with most businesses on the island — who was heavily involved with ways to improve the storage of potatoes in Poland, Europe's largest potato producer."

On Murray's advice, CIE investigated further the Polish market by contracting Peter Pihos of U.S.-based Electronic Display Group (EDG) to look for Polish customers.

"Pihos prepared a marketing study, working closely with Trade Commissioners at the Canadian Embassy in Warsaw, narrowing it down to Elektra Zalady — a company of 250 people, controlling 95 per cent of the Polish signal-light market, with channels of exports to former Soviet bloc countries," recalls Banks.

"It took quite a bit of money to find the right company," says Banks, "as well as making two trips to Poland and inviting three officials from

Elektra to P.E.I. two years ago to show them our engineering and manufacturing resources in Atlantic Canada."

Government assistance made the difference
The three Elektra officials were satisfied with their visit to the various installations, leading to further negotiations.

"Coming from a country that was used to government backing," Banks points out, "they were especially pleased to learn that the Government, through Enterprise P.E.I., had made an initial investment in CIE."

But the hopes of struggling CIE were kept alive even before then by various government agencies.

"We received some critical financial assistance," says Banks, "through Industrial Technology Advisor Alan Brown, from the National Research Council's Industrial Research Assistance Program (IRAP)."

Banks also gives high marks to Lori Pendleton, Director, Business Expansion at Enterprise P.E.I. "The financial assistance and advice we received was most helpful in getting us through the maze of steps and procedures for setting up shop.

"Without these agencies, including

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