

Women's trade jaunt opens door to the U.S.

First-time D-11 mission provides export assistance

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Entrepreneur Melanie Sibbitt got to bend the International Trade Minister's ear, dine with Canada's ambassador to the U.S., and sign an export deal worth at least \$250,000 (U.S.) — all during last week's Businesswomen's Team Canada Trade Mission to Washington, D.C.

Sibbitt was one of 125 Canadian business owners on the four-day trade mission, the first of its kind aimed specifically at women entrepreneurs.

The mini-trade mission was designed to give women entrepreneurs the kind of government export assistance often enjoyed by larger, male-run enterprises, organizers said.

"It's very prestigious to get an introduction through your embassy," said Andrina Lever, of Toronto-based business consultants Lever Entreprises Inc., which acted as special advisers to the mission.

Yet, women entrepreneurs are under-represented on traditional Team Canada trade missions, Lever said. Often they're too long, too expensive and aimed at larger firms than most women run, she said.

"Often, they're 10 days to two weeks long, and many women can't afford to be away from home that long, especially if they have children."

Women-owned firms are creating jobs at four times the national average, she said. There are now 700,000 Canadian businesses owned by women employing 1.7 million Canadians, more than the top 100 companies combined, she said.

It was these arguments that convinced Canada's embassy in Washington to host an all-women's trade mission, led by International Trade Minister Sergio Marchi.

Sibbitt's firm, Two Crazy Ladies Inc., a name chosen simply because she and her sister like to make people laugh, was one of several that signed deals during the trip. The company's business is corporate incentive and promotional products, such as T-shirts, ball caps and key rings, she said.

Sibbitt estimates the value of the strategic alliance she formed with a convention organizer based in Las Vegas could boost her annual sales by at least a third.

The total value of the trade mission in terms of future sales is still being tabulated, said Astrid Pregel, minister-counsel international business development, the senior embassy official who organized the mission.

Many women on the trip did as much business with each other as they did with the Americans, Lever said.

"Apparently, that happens on other trade missions as well. We just don't hear about it."

The mission included opportunities to meet with Marchi to discuss business concerns. Along with the usual complaints of getting through cus-

toms, several women wanted income tax laws changed so they could declare child-care costs as a business expense.

Sarmite Bulte, a lawyer and MP for Parkdale-High Park who was on the trip, has already raised the issue with Finance Minister Paul Martin.

"If you own your own business why shouldn't you be able to write off your nanny's salary the same way you write off your assistant's salary?"

Carol Feeney, who runs Hip Hype Inc., an Internet public relations and marketing company in Toronto, raised the GST issue with Marchi. Her U.S. clients don't want to pay it and wait to be reimbursed.

"It makes dealing with Canadians a hassle."

Several participants described the trip as an incredible morale booster for themselves and their business.