

Where Are They Now?



“It takes effort and follow-up to do a sale virtually – you can’t rely totally on your web site to do all your sales work.”

Christine Rowland

Founder & CEO
Blue Cat Design

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Year Established: 1995

Employees: 10 “virtual”

1997 Export Sales: 70%

2007 Export Sales: 88%

Export Markets: U.S., Caribbean, Mexico,
Australia, Europe

DESCRIPTION: Blue Cat Design specializes in custom web design and programming and in providing search engine optimization (SEO) services. Its award-winning design, technological expertise and dedication to client service have attracted a diverse international clientele.

BACKGROUND: Christine has always been an innovator and early adaptor of technology. Owner of a book publishing company in the 80’s, she had one of the very first Macintosh computers and designed with desktop publishing before others even knew what it was. “I’ve always enjoyed technology; I’m half artist, half geek.” As a designer and former Art Director for CTV, Christine found the transition from the broadcast world to the Web a logical one because of the focus on animation and graphics. A frequent speaker on new media topics, she has been active in her industry and received the Ontario Global Trader’s Award for Leadership in Exporting in 1999 and a Canadian New Media Award in 2000.

COMPETITIVE EDGE: Blue Cat is a pioneer both in web design and SEO. “Our skill set in getting high rankings for client sites is what attracts them, and our ongoing customer service that focuses on their online business strategy is what keeps them.”

GROWTH PATH: Over 75% of Blue Cat’s clients are based in the U.S., 10% higher than a decade ago. “Interestingly, we even get referrals from people and companies that I don’t know, but they’ve heard of our reputation.” Even though Christine has not met most of her clients face to face, she has developed strong relationships. “When you speak with customers by phone over a period of years, you feel like you really know each other and can even become friends long distance.”

INTERNATIONAL MARKETING: “The Web is the only way.” Blue Cat’s own site is linked from many other sites and typically ranks in Google’s top 10.

BIGGEST EXPORTING CHALLENGE: “Most businesses don’t have the budget to advertise to each of their markets in the traditional way, so the only real effective way is through the Internet. However, there are millions of web sites that aren’t performing because they lack SEO and linking strategies. It’s tricky because some companies claim they can provide high

rankings, but they actually engage in unethical practices that can get sites banned from search engines. It’s important to deal with a reputable firm that has good client references.”

EXPORTING ADVICE FOR SERVICE COMPANIES:

“Have a strong Web presence with a great site that is professionally designed, visually pleasing, easy to navigate, optimized for search engines and has a linking strategy in place so that it ranks high. This will lead to queries and leads, which require proper follow up. If you are targeting the U.S., get a toll-free number to make it easy and seamless for prospects and customers to contact you. They won’t even realize they are calling another country. And set up progressive payments to ensure you are being compensated early enough, particularly for large, time-consuming projects. In our case, we get a 50% deposit before starting and the balance before the site is loaded on the Internet.”

EXPORT PLANS: The U.S. continues to be Christine’s primary target. “It is a huge export market, Americans are comfortable dealing with us, the currency is not an issue and the time zones are compatible.”

Reflections on 1997 Washington Trade Mission

Benefits: “I found it valuable and made good contacts through the meetings that were arranged. Some of the American companies followed up. An unexpected bonus was doing business with the other Canadian women business owners I met and building web sites for a number of them.”

Biggest Take-Away: “It was a great experience overall – particularly the networking and sharing of knowledge, business information and advice with the other participants.”