

## Woman executives target U.S.

### Team Canada delegation includes many women who run smaller firms

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WASHINGTON - Bev Durvin represents the next phase of Canada's export-market strategy.

The Calgary businesswoman is one of 125 business leaders accompanying Trade Minister Sergio Marchi on a three-day Team Canada trade mission to the Washington area designed to create even greater opportunities for Canadian products in the U.S.

Team Canada trade missions are becoming a routine part of Ottawa's strategy for building an export-oriented economy.

What is different about this mission that begins today is its size, the fact that all the participants are heads or executives of small and medium-sized businesses, and that they are all women, representing women-owned firms from every province except Prince Edward Island.

"This couldn't have come at a better time for us because we are planning to launch our export plan for the U.S. in February," explained Durvin, who is director of marketing for Flagworks, a small firm with 20 employees and close to \$5 million in sales.

The company, owned by 1995 Canadian Woman Entrepreneur of the Year fi-

nalist Arlene Flock designs and manufactures sweatshirts, T-shirts and jackets emblazoned with distinctive designs based on national flags.

"For us, the key attraction was that the mission had an export emphasis, and that it was made up of businesswomen was an extra comfort level for us," said Durvin, who was hoping she would find a market here for the company's new line of U.S.-flag apparel.

The mission, the first of its kind for Canada, is almost a perfect fit of mutual interests for the businesswomen and the Canadian government.

With more than \$1 billion in bilateral trade flowing across the Canada-U.S. border every day, the temptation may be to say that Canada's export objectives vis-a-vis their southern neighbour are being met.

But, in truth, both the U.S. and Canada believe that a vast, untapped trade potential lies in the small and medium-sized firms of both countries, which make up an increasing portion of the economy and rarely think beyond their regions.

And as a senior Canadian trade offi-

cial pointed out, women-led small and medium-sized firms are growing at three or four times the rate of those directed by men. There are 700,000 women-led businesses in Canada, accounting for 1.7 million jobs.

At the same time, women business owners are the new kids on the block in the world of commerce and are the least likely to have experience marketing their products and expertise outside the country.

The trade mission will give the Canadian women an opportunity to learn about customs regulations and market strategies, as well as make contacts with businesses in the Washington region. The Canadian entrepreneurs will be meeting with leaders of 40 regional firms on Friday.

"We're not going to take home \$100 million in contracts, but we know there are women who will be signing their first contracts in the U.S. this week," said Audrina Lever, a Toronto consultant who is one of the organizers of the mission.

For most of the participants, the value of the trip will be in the lessons to

be learned about taking their enterprises to the next level.

"I'm looking forward to see who the mentors are, particularly the American mentors," said Shereca Pennie, president of Ottawa-based Delta Media, a public-relations firm. "There are a lot of American women who have been successful in business and exporting who will have practical advice to offer."

Pennie, who recently handled public relations for the Somalia inquiry, said that coming from a capital city she is hoping to make useful contacts with her counterparts in the U.S. capital.

Others, like Melanie Sibbitt of Two Crazy Ladies Inc. of Toronto, is thinking purely in business terms. She has already formed a strategic partnership with a Nevada convention-management firm to create promotional materials - such as T-shirts, pens, mugs emblazoned with corporate logos - for conventions in the western U.S., and is now hoping to make inroads in the Northeast.

"We're the same as any other businesses, only they're run by women," she explained.

"I'm looking at this as an opportunity of a lifetime because traditionally it's been men who have been the exporters. Now it's our turn."