



BluePrint Automation, Chesterfield County

Tools of the Trade

Several VEDP international trade programs are helping foreign-owned Virginia companies boost business operations in other markets

When Dutch secondary packaging solutions provider BluePrint Automation decided to open a U.S. location in 1987, the company chose a site in Chesterfield County near Richmond, due in part to the regional talent market and multiple nearby ports that could facilitate importing.

Today while the Dutch and U.S. facilities collaborate at times from a design and manufacturing standpoint, BluePrint's Virginia branch functions fairly independently, according to Robbie Quinlin, the company's marketing manager for the Americas.

"The Netherlands is not our headquarters," Quinlin said. "We actually operate as two separate entities. Globally, our facility in the Netherlands takes care of the Europe and Asia markets."

After initially offering packaging systems primarily to customers in the U.S., to extend its reach farther south,

BluePrint retained local sales agents to gain a foothold in countries such as Mexico and Brazil.

The company, however, wasn't getting as much traction as it would have liked in some areas, Quinlin said. To support its sales efforts in Latin America, BluePrint signed on to participate in VEDP's two-year Virginia Leaders in Export Trade (VALET) program in 2003.

The business acceleration program, launched in 2002, provides Virginia companies with resources to bolster their international growth — ranging from sales plan development assistance to access to international professional services providers who can offer expertise in areas like transportation or the law.

"There may be someone who's really knowledgeable about export tax or shipping," Quinlin said. "You're able to make those connections with other resources right here in Virginia."

ADDITIONAL AMENITIES

The VALET program accepts 25 companies a year. Program participants who have completed it — to date, 375 organizations — report a 78% average increase in international sales.

The initiative is one of several VEDP sponsors to help Virginia businesses enhance their global operations.

The State Trade Expansion Program (STEP) Grant, funded through a Cooperative Agreement with the U.S. Small Business Administration, was established to raise the value of products companies sell in other countries and increase the number of small businesses in the Commonwealth that export items.

VEDP's Trade Show Program provides eligible companies with up to \$10,000 in reimbursements to exhibit at product-, service-, or industry-related events that occur outside of the U.S. or have a demonstrated international aspect.

VEDP has also offered more informal assistance to companies, such as connecting Blueprint with a translation services provider who also served as

a local point of contact when the manufacturer sponsored a booth at a Sao Paulo trade conference in 2010.

"As small as that may seem, it's not," Quinlin said. "When you're doing the planning and you're not local to that country and don't speak the language, that's a big help."

The translation capabilities allowed Blueprint to attend the event. Quinlin said, which was a key component of its promotional plan for the region.

"We're really established in our industry in the U.S.; not so much in Latin America," he said. "We're still growing in that market. Going to the trade shows, we're trying to set ourselves up as a leader. Brand awareness is huge. What the program is providing is immeasurable — it's allowing us the opportunity to become who we should be there."

EXTERNAL INSIGHT

After relying on local agents to enter the market in South America and Mexico more than a decade ago, Blueprint hired full-time sales employees who now live

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Blueprint Automation

and work directly with customers where the company has a presence — which has helped strengthen its foundation in those countries, said Mario Pino, vice president of sales for Latin America.

"We have experts who speak the language, know the marketplace," Pino said. "We have a regional sales director who lives in Mexico. We have another regional sales manager who

lives in three different areas — Miami, Colombia, and Chile. He is responsible for South America."

Yet even with strong boots-on-the-ground support, obtaining the necessary information to identify potential new clients in other countries — including their most pressing needs and the best way to reach them — can be a time-consuming endeavor.

"The research is extremely important for any company to be able to know how to attack a particular market," Pino said. "That's the only way you can be successful. [But] it will take anywhere between three to five years to do it yourself."

When Blueprint wanted to determine last year if there were any snack producers in Brazil that might be interested in the company's automated packaging equipment, VEDP worked with a consultant in Brazil to secure detailed market research on the topic.

"The results that came back were good," Pino said. "I was impressed. I told Robbie, 'It's valuable information

for us to be able to expand our business for that particular industry.' It reassured us [about] the direction we were taking."

CONQUERING INTERNATIONAL COMMERCE

Blueprint is currently planning to participate in the VALET program again this year. The company has already engaged Fairfax County-based business management consultant Capstone Strategic, Inc. to determine locations to concentrate on.

"They did some preliminary research and gave us a matrix to say, 'This country's headed upward; this one, not so much,'" Quinlin said. "We're a mid-sized company, but if you're a smaller company trying to penetrate that market, and your resources are even more limited, you don't want to waste them in a country that's not ready or able to buy."

If Blueprint's future business development efforts in South America ultimately help boost sales in the region, the company's domestic operations, Pino said, could also potentially expand.

Its U.S. headquarters — which have been located in Chesterfield since the 1990s — are, in fact, already scheduled to have 60,000 square feet of space added by April 2024.

"We've been going to these trade shows, promoting Blueprint," Pino said. "With the assistance of the VALET program, that growth can be further extended. That help allows us to sell more; in the future, expand the factory — it's a benefit for us, but it's [also] a benefit for the community in Chesterfield." ♦