

Torklift expands exports with global market research

SUMNER, Wash. – Torklift International has been making hitches, suspension products, steps and a variety of after-market hardware for recreational vehicles since 1976, but most of their sales were in North America.

Their export capacity got a big boost in 2015 when they started working with Sharon Sappington, an international trade specialist with the Washington Small Business Development Center, to open a distribution center in Sydney, Australia.

Jay Taylor, Torklift general manager, credits Sappington with helping the Australia expansion go smoothly.

He was particularly impressed by Sapping-

ton's ability to deliver what she promised and keep the project moving forward: "One of her greatest assets was her follow-through," Taylor said. "She was absolutely spot on."

According to Taylor, Torklift experienced tremendous growth when the recession hit in 2008, in large part because people in the U.S. and around the world rediscovered camping as a low cost vacation option. Sales have increased about 20 to 25 percent each year since then, and in 2011 Torklift moved to a new 52,000-square-foot facility in Sumner, Wash., to meet growing demand.

In 2015 the company set a goal of increasing export sales, starting with Australia.

Torklift was already selling products in Australia, Sappington said, and there were signs that the market could be increased substantially. But customers were placing orders for single parts or small quantities, so shipping was expensive and it could take several weeks or longer for a part to arrive from the U.S.

If Torklift wanted to increase sales in Australia, it would have to figure out how to get products to customers more quickly and without the high shipping costs.

Sappington worked with Taylor and other Torklift executives, including President Jack Kay and Senior Vice President of Marketing Candice Boutilier, on taxes, duties, trade laws, container shipping, third-party warehousing and distribution.

Opening a distribution center in Australia so that products could be sent in large shipping containers seemed like the best solution, but would the market support that expansion? What type of distribution cen-

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ter and warehouse? And which products of the possible thousands should be warehoused?

Sappington offered the services of Washington SBDC's market research team to find the data to answer these and other critical questions.

"The key to getting useful data is asking the right questions," she said. This research request was tricky due to the type, amount and availability of data needed. Working with the Torklift executives, she carefully crafted an extensive request for the global market research team.

"The team did a terrific job," Sappington said. "The report was thorough, rich in just the right information and exactly what Torklift needed to make decisions."

Without a mentor or guide, Taylor said, "you can make mistakes that you aren't even aware of" until they come back to bite you. "More people should know about the services of the SBDC."

After a successful launch in Australia, he said, the company is planning expansion in Europe.

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