

IN Firm Aims To Help Double U.S. Exports

Bowdeya Tweh, The Times

ST. JOHN, Ind. (AP) — Bill Keith's business office is akin to a mad scientist's lab.

Dozens of his more than 45 models of solar-powered attic fans are stacked neatly in boxes prepped for global wide customers. Next to the fans are motors and other equipment from solar fans by competitors so he can see their progress.

Pins are scattered across a wall map in a second-floor room, representing the customers SunRise Solar Inc. has pursued. With a grin, Keith said his company plans to double its exports easily next year. It's also possible the company could quadruple its exports by the end of this decade.

"I don't care if you've only sold \$5,000 worth of goods," Keith said. "With good marketing material, a good website, have a good system in place," you can export.

In President Barack Obama's State of the Union address in 2010, he said the nation would double its level of exports in five years.

While multinational companies such as Ford Motor Co., Caterpillar Inc. and General Electric Co. are among the country's export leaders, U.S. trade officials and business groups want more small and mid-size businesses to boost their export capacity.

Based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the United States exported \$2.1 trillion of goods and services in 2011, a record for the country. To meet the president's goal, the nation would have to reach \$3.14 trillion of exports in 2015.

Mark Cooper, director of the U.S. Commercial Service's Indiana office, said his goal is to spread the word about exports with the assistance of experts from the business community and entities such as the Indiana Economic Development Corp.

Now that the freeze of the recession is letting up, Cooper said he is finding more companies that are interested in jumping into the export market. With the international exposure Northwest Indiana businesses have, they could be well positioned to increase the number of overseas opportunities.

"The U.S. government has a large arsenal of tools that can help you compete globally," Cooper said. "Not only do we do these programs, but we go door to door and tell them about it."

Cooper said 58 percent of exporters sell only to one market. Through the National Export Initiative, he said, there's a goal to boost the number of international markets that existing companies serve. Earlier this year, the U.S. Commercial Service and an affiliated volunteer nonprofit organization, the District Export

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Council, launched a program called Export University. It offers information for companies new to exporting and those that are veterans.

"Learning about payments and tariffs and documentation that's required and regulations and rules and certifications, it's actually a pretty exciting process," Keith said. "There's a lot of hurdles, but if you look at it as an obstacle course ... you see progress."

About 30 to 35 percent of Merrillville-based NuVant Systems' electronics sales are to overseas customers, said Eugene Smotkin, NuVant's founder and chief executive. Adding Canada to the mix, international buyers make up more than half of the company's sales.

NuVant, a renewable energy electronics maker, plans to send three pieces of equipment to a Saudi Arabian company in a couple of weeks, but the process to send the products there started a year ago. Smotkin said the equipment had to be delivered with a manual published in Arabic and had to feature a CE label, a certification that shows the products meet certain European regulatory standards.

Keith Kirkpatrick, chief executive of the project management consulting firm KPM Group Inc. in Valparaiso, said he finds owners and managers who have success in international business tend to have a natural desire to learn about other countries and cultures. Kirkpatrick has owned a manufacturing firm, taught college students overseas and done international consulting work. He said it's important for businesses to make connections in the markets in which they are interested.

Making those connections do come with caution, however.

"You can connect, but you still have to measure the credibility and viability of the person on the other end, whether that's going to be a partner or supplier or a customer," Kirkpatrick said.

Cooper said about a quarter of his office's work involves refining business strategies. The Commercial Service also offers companies a survey on export readiness. Cooper said the more a company's product stands out in the marketplace, the more likely it could be successful in international markets. Companies also have to have an export strategy and long-term vision.

"We're not in the business of promoting failure," Cooper said. "We're promoting global companies that can do well."

With the success of his company and a burgeoning market for renewable energy technology, SunRise Solar's Keith said it's important for him to stay ahead of his competition by continuing to develop more advanced solar fans. He has gotten help from business coaches and the U.S. Commercial Service, and he would like to see more mom-and-pop businesses become exporters.

"If our leaders could get behind more small business manufacturing, we could really go somewhere," Keith said.

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