Teamwork Lands Americans in Paris

ITA Program Assists Small and Medium-sized Companies

by Brad Hess
Market Development Cooperator Program, Trade Development

A recent fashion exhibition in Paris underscored the value added when non-profit groups work with the International Trade Administration (ITA) to benefit small and medium-sized enterprises. One way that the ITA teams up with non-profits is through the Market Development Cooperator Program. Through this program, the ITA provides both financial and program management assistance.

In October 2000, the ITA awarded the Garment Industry Development Corporation (GIDC) $375,000 to promote New York fashion in Europe. With its cooperator award and collaboration with ITA specialists, the GIDC is developing its New York Fashion International (NYFI) program through a virtual showroom on the Internet, support of exporters and foreign buyers, assistance to firms preparing for trade missions and fashion shows, and public relations.

Photo courtesy of GIDC.

Larry Brill, front, and Monica Montavon of the ITA meet regularly with Christophe Le Gorju of New York Fashion International.

Recipients of cooperator funds like the GIDC use regular meetings with the ITA to focus their efforts and explore opportunities. As part of its cooperator award, the GIDC coordinates regularly with ITA team leader Monica Montavon; Larry Brill, a textiles and apparel division director in the ITA Trade Development unit; and Anastasia Xenias. Unlike Montavon and Brill, who are based in Washington, D.C., Xenias works in Manhattan for the U.S. Commercial Service, another ITA unit. Coordination and cooperation among NYFI and ITA professionals in Washington, New York, and abroad helped NYFI put Americans in Paris.

Prior to receiving its cooperator funding, the GIDC had already developed a strong partnership with the ITA on its national textile and apparel team. Through this partnership, Christophe Le Gorju, head of NYFI, has often worked with Xenias, Brill, and others.

One idea discussed was a major GIDC fashion event abroad in 2002. Xenias worked with Commercial Service posts abroad exploring this possibility; but without funding, such an event could not happen.

PR TO PRÊT À PORTER

Le Gorju traveled to Washington to meet with Montavon and Brill to finalize plans for a September public relations campaign, as prescribed in the GIDC cooperator award. He left, instead, with the fashion event that the GIDC needed.

The ITA members of the GIDC cooperator team considered the fashion event idea. Working with U.S.

Photo courtesy of GIDC.

The Paris fashion world gets a peek at the creative designs of Victor de Souza.

Photo courtesy of GIDC.

Elegance is evident both in Victor de Souza's gown, foreground, and the bas-relief of the Hotel Talleyrand, background.

Commercial Service posts abroad, Xenias had already identified three possible cities, which the team whittled down to one: Paris.

The timing was right to do an event coinciding with a big "haute couture" show in Paris. However, Brill and Montavon advised that more appropriate exposure would occur during Prêt à Porter ("ready-to-wear") Fashion Week, a little later in the season. The small and medium-sized New York apparel firms likely to benefit from and participate in the event were those most interested in ready-to-wear fashion. With these parameters set, the ITA team agreed to redirect cooperator award funds from public relations to pay for the event.

The plan was not without risk. If it worked, NYFI would be able to attract a critical mass of New York designers to Paris. Having their own intimate exhibition in Paris during Prêt à Porter would be an opportunity that some New York designers would find hard to pass by despite travel concerns and a slow economy. If it flopped, however, they could find themselves alone in their exhibition space while Prêt à Porter Fashion Week went on elsewhere without them.

AMERICANS IN PARIS

Caroline de Villoutreys, commercial specialist of the U.S. Commercial Service in Paris, saw to many of the details and arranged an exhibition venue. Known as the Hotel Talleyrand, this centuries-old landmark is a former residence in the center of Paris on Place de la Concorde. Owned by the U.S. government, it is an elegant space, but very difficult to book.

With an unbeatable venue secured by the ITA, NYFI signed two exhibition co-sponsors: Gilles Bensimon, director of publications of Elle USA; and Didier Grumbach, president of the French Federation of Haute Couture and Prêt à Porter. The sponsors defrayed some of the expenses and added prestige.

The October exhibition, "Americans in Paris," featured Spring 2003 looks from Rubin Chapelle, Victor de Souza, Vilma Mare, David Rodriguez, Alice Roi, and Gaelyn & Cianfarani. NYFI secured models to showcase several outfits of these New York designers.

The one-and-a-half-day exhibition was a great success. More than 300 international buyers and media representatives attended the event. Le Gorju, who was born and raised in France, was more than happy to point out that "New York is home to some of the most inventive and creative designers." Although this may have been obvious to the visitors to the event, it was no accident that New York designers had the chance to let their clothes do the talking.

Many steps led to the success of "Americans in Paris": the partnership of the GIDC and the ITA national textile and apparel team, cooperator award funds, and coordination with the team of ITA specialists. ■

A more comprehensive view of the offerings of these and other New York designers is available at the NYFI virtual showroom: www.nyfi.org.

FUNDING COOPERATIVE PROJECTS

Each spring for the last 10 years, organizations seeking to develop foreign markets have competed for Market Development Cooperator Program awards. Applicants propose projects to increase U.S. exports. Winners enter into cooperative agreements with the International Trade Administration. The agreements confer special access to ITA trade specialists and financial assistance of up to $400,000.

These award winners, or "cooperators," contribute at least two-thirds of the cost of each project in matching funds and in-kind contributions. Since the program began in 1993, the ITA has awarded $20.8 million. The 70 cooperators selected during the past 10 years have matched this with $57.6 million.

The results have been impressive. For every federal dollar invested, cooperative projects have yielded $86 in exports. Each year, on average, cooperators help U.S. companies export $227 million in goods and services.

Cooperators make up a variety of organizations serving business communities. Their ranks include large industry organizations like the National Electrical Manufacturers Association (NEMA) as well as small organizations like the South Dakota International Business Institute (SDIBI). To increase exports to Brazil and Mexico, the NEMA has worked in these countries to promote the adoption of product standards used by most U.S. firms. Meanwhile, the SDIBI has helped some U.S. producers of industrial spray washers get established in Mexico by attending a trade show and securing an agent.

The competition for cooperator awards usually opens in late winter, with applications due in early spring. Eligible entities generally include trade associations, small business development centers, World Trade Centers, state trade agencies, chambers of commerce, and other nonprofit industry organizations. Private companies are generally not eligible.

Additional information on eligibility is available at www.export.gov/mdcp. This Web site is the best source for program information, including application dates and other details. Those interested in e-mail notification regarding the cooperator application deadline and related news can register on-line at the site.