

Norfolk management consultancy uses UKTI support to pursue Middle Eastern contracts

Last week Rachel Blackburn, CEO of management consultancy US2U Consulting, discussed her export strategy with Prime Minister David Cameron at the launch of his East of England campaign – a sure sign that export activity is increasing her credibility both at home and abroad.

When Rachel founded her Norwich-based consultancy in 2006 she knew from the outset that she wanted US2U to have international reach; offering tailor-made corporate solutions from executive coaching to culture change management, the company's services had global application. Despite early export opportunities in Bahrain and Australia, underpinned by UKTI support, US2U's overseas activity was quickly curtailed by the need to prioritise an increasing workload in the UK. Two years ago Rachel re-contacted UKTI as she felt more able to devote sufficient time to developing and pursuing a sustainable strategy for overseas trade.

UKTI International Trade Adviser Leszek Wysocki suggested that the Gateway to Global Growth programme, which helps experienced exporters to take their export strategy to the next level, would refresh and extend Rachel's knowledge. "The two-day workshop at Cranfield School of Management was particularly beneficial," comments Rachel. "It was really useful to get advice on pricing. I've kept in touch with Robert Craven, the lecturer, who has since given me valuable advice on how to word a particular contract or cost a proposal."

Leszek then encouraged Rachel to attend a UKTI Trade Mission to the Middle East in December 2013. With a focus on education and skills the visit to Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) offered a good fit with US2U's management consultancy work. "The trade mission offered Rachel a great introduction to more than 30 potential clients in this region," says Leszek.

"We were expertly chaperoned in order to help us make the most of our business visit to an unfamiliar region," explains Rachel. "It was a little like a school trip! We were advised what to wear, told where to be at what time, and who to speak with. Leszek also came on the trade mission, which was really useful as he saw at first-hand how different companies responded to my pitch and was also able to use his Embassy contacts to help me."

After the trade mission Rachel made follow-up sales visits to Oman and Dubai, in April and September 2014. "I gained additional insights into how business culture in the Middle East differs from the UK. For example, the business community in Oman can be resistant to new competitors, as I discovered when I arrived at a pre-arranged appointment only to find that a local competitor had turned up specifically to undercut my prices."

Rachel decided to narrow her focus to the more accessible Dubai market. Leszek explains, "UK companies are well respected, particularly in the education and skills sector, to the extent that companies will often specify that they would like a British executive coach rather than one of a different nationality." He adds, "Talent management companies in Dubai also have women in senior roles, which may have made them more amenable to considering Rachel as an executive coach."

Rachel recently secured a formal contract worth £60,000 with a client in Media City, Dubai, that will see her deliver one-on-one coaching to six executives over a one year period. “The fact that the UK government is supporting my work has given me significant credibility in the eyes of UAE nationals,” she comments.

Rachel’s commitment to overseas trade has also created new opportunities closer to home: “The University of East Anglia has hired me to do some leadership development work with 56 young managers from Saudi Arabia,” she says. “In addition, I have been running team development days for Alstom Power in Ireland since last summer as a direct result of my growing reputation for working internationally.”

“It hasn’t been an easy journey - it’s taken me 18 months to get to this point,” says Rachel. “Leszek has continually encouraged me, saying ‘Don’t give up’ when things have been difficult. The outlook is bright: I’m proud of what I have achieved thus far and I now have a clear strategy for selling executive coaching to the Dubai market.”

“Very rarely will companies secure new business during their first trip to the Middle East, and Rachel’s experience is proof that perseverance can deliver worthwhile fruit over time,” adds Leszek.

(729 words)

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