



Export Success Story

University-Government Partnership Helps Local Small Businesses Export

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Small Company Finds Safety in Export Markets

Tuscaloosa, Alabama - A local company in Cullman has found that exporting can be a safe bet. Philip Clemmons, owner of Elk River Safety Belt Inc., just returned from an international trade show in Malaysia, where he opened up a world of opportunities for his products.

Elk River is a manufacturer of safety belts and harnesses used in the construction, mining, and utility industries in the United States. Elk River's products offer protection for workers against falls and accidents. According to Clemmons, worker protection and safety standards in some countries are not what they are here in the states, creating a good market for his products. "We plan to get in on the ground floor with our products, and really be able to help protect local workers, save lives," said Clemmons.

The good thing is that many of Elk River's best markets are growing faster than the U.S. market, proving the old adage true that exports help smooth out fluctuations in sales from domestic economic cycles. "Construction is booming in Southeast Asia, a region we have targeted", Clemmons said. During their first year of exporting, Elk River's foreign sales climbed over 160 %. Their initial success in the export market is no accident. "The owner of this small firm is committed to exporting and has invested in it," according to Carol DeCastra of the Alabama International Trade Center (AITC). Elk River turned to the AITC, a partnership program between the U.S. Small Business Administration and the University of Alabama, for help. "It's easy to feel his enthusiasm for exporting and we hope other small firms will follow his lead," noted DeCastra. She was able to help Elk River access several federal and state programs including an SBA loan, the State's Linked Deposit Program for the construction of a new building, and the Alabama Export Council's grant for attending overseas trade shows. Clemmons also used the AITC's research and training programs to target markets and build skills within Elk River to deal with export procedures.

Clemmons has taken the initiative to travel overseas, attend shows, and meet with prospective customers. While he faces stiff tariff barriers for his products in some markets, Clemmons has appointed several local representatives in Asia and is working with them and other organizations to overcome the obstacles and make sales.

The Birmingham News once ran a story on Clemmons and Elk River Safety, showing the CEO serve as a “test dummy” for a new product. He was shown in a photo jumping off a tower in the R& D center of the new production facility while wearing one of the company’s safety devices. This is the level of confidence in the product and company that he carries overseas. And it makes him no dummy to export customers and markets either.