

Going Global

by Barbara Barclay

While small, family-owned companies can do very well locally, they can also expand their horizons and plunge into the international market. You may not think your business is a candidate for that kind of growth, but with a little outside-of-the-box thinking and some great networking skills, you could make that dream a reality.

Several years ago, Leros Point to Point was a local, Westchester-based limousine company. Today it is a worldwide ground transportation company, providing car service to over 550 cities around the globe.

“Our growth was customer-driven,” Chris Nyikos, Executive Vice President and Worldwide Business Development Director for Leros, said recently in an interview. “Our customers asked us if we could provide ground transportation at different travel destinations – they wanted one centralized company, a one-stop shopping experience for reservations and confirmations, and they asked if we coordinate *all* of their transportation to make it easier for them.” Leros responded to this need by going “global.”

Companies wishing to expand should start small and look within their customer base, Nyikos recommended. “We thought we’d have to go out and get new customers in order to grow in other cities, but that wasn’t the case at all,” he said. In response to customer requests, “we started by expanding in the tri-state area, we then grew domestically, and finally, about four years ago, we expanded globally. It was always in response to our customers’ needs. Each city that we serve originated as a client request—first London, then Paris and Frankfurt—our global growth resulted from our desire to be a solution provider for our clients.” Nyikos advises that when expanding into new markets, you should first look to your existing customers; they will be the ones who will use your services outside of your area.

Certainly expansion comes with lessons and cautions. Unique situations in specific markets may require special measures to make it work.

Sometimes it’s a matter of language: “Ninety percent of our foreign drivers speak English,” said Nyikos. You want to make sure you’re really communicating and speaking with a translator may be necessary. Other times, some extra ingenuity is required. When growing into the South American market, for instance, Leros created a new category of drivers called “Security Drivers.” Because they have a background in either the military or law enforcement, Security Drivers provide an added measure of safety for business people traveling in areas which might require extra caution. Again,

this service was developed in response to a customer need and has been implemented in some of the larger South American cities like San Palo and Bogotá.

By far, the biggest challenge for developing a global business is cultivating international relationships. You can achieve this by traveling to some of the larger cities and spending time there, meeting and discussing business possibilities. But attending industry trade shows might give you more mileage and be a better option.

Industry-specific trade shows enable participants to network with people offering the same service in other parts of the world. While each market is different, within industries there are commonalities that all businesses share. Meeting and learning from each other allows you to benefit from everyone's experience, learning how to avoid mistakes and follow best practices.

A modest first step for international growth might include going into Canada or Mexico as an initial foray into a foreign market. "As far as growth goes, we see a lot of new business in Toronto and Montreal." Nyikos said. "Recently we added an excellent affiliate company in Mexico City, and by partnering with them, we were able to handle quite a large project providing service to over 500 people."

Our current economy is showing a state-side slowdown, but doing business in other parts of the world opens doors to new possibilities. "Our newest business has been in India; we're providing transportation in Mumbai and New Delhi and many other cities there now." Nyikos said.

As with developing a business in your local community, building a global business requires the same key ingredient: building relationships is the cornerstone for success.

"There's a trust factor when you meet someone, shake their hand, have a face to face conversation with them," Nyikos summed up. "Then later when you're on the phone doing business with them, even though you're thousands of miles away, it makes it easier knowing who you're dealing with; you know that they're going to provide your service vision to your customers." Providing impeccable service for your customers, no matter where in the world they are, is the fundamental trait for all successful businesses. And that characteristic is the same whether you're in Stamford, London or Calcutta.

So, when you're considering where to go with your business, remember, you too may be able to go "global."

Barbara Barclay is the Marketing and Business Development Director for Leros Point to Point in Fairfield County. She can be reached at 800-825-3767 x1255 or at barbara.barclay@LerosLimo.com.