

Going Global Despite the Odds

CEO shares how her company is reaching its global goal

Connie Russell Gorum, the founder and CEO of C. L. Russell Group, LLC (CLRG), an industry workforce training company, started CLRG in 2015 after leaving her government job with a vision and a strategic plan—to become a global industry workforce training company. Today, CLRG is well on its way to reaching its global goal after only two years of founding the company. The playing field changed for CLRG in 2016 when the company was selected among seven small and medium-size American companies to participate in the United States – Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce (USACC) U.S. Trade Mission to Azerbaijan and Georgia organized in partnership with ExportDC. This opportunity strategically positioned the company's goal of becoming a global industry workforce training company.

Connie shares some insight from her interview with Becky Mangus, publisher of *The Biz Monthly*, on her global journey and steps to help other entrepreneurs pursuing globalization.

When/why did you decide to set global goals for your business?

I've always been considered a big dreamer and risk-taker, so when I decided to start my business, I knew maintaining that mindset was very



important for the success of my business. Small businesses have access to so many resources today that allow us to explore areas we could only think about and watch others #GoBig. That's no longer the case today. Today, small businesses compete with large businesses, so I knew I had to think big if I wanted to be a player in the game. So, going global was the only position for me to take.

How did you achieve your initial global connection?

Being selected in the U. S. Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce (USACC) U.S. Trade Mission to Azerbaijan and Georgia in partnership with ExportDC literally opened the global connection for me. Pursuing global connections without an experienced colleague is very challenging.

What was it about the 2016 Trade Mission Trip that made your dream of a becoming a global company seem possible?

After the Trade Mission Trip, I finally had access to contacts. The mission featured participation in the country's economic and sector briefings, networking receptions, exclusive meetings with relevant government officials, B2B appointments with prospective global agents, distributors, partners, and end-users. I learned about the country's trending industries and their economic climate. This opportunity allowed me to develop relationships with both embassies. I now have access to special embassy events and meetings concerning the economic status of both countries and forecasting updates. This helps my company stay current with developing global performance solutions for diverse industries. Understanding your industry from a local and global perspective will better position you for success.

Were these two countries on your radar when planning your global strategy?

They were not. To be truthful, this was my first time learning about these two countries, which made it more interesting. Don't limit yourself; engage in new markets.

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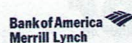
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What were the first steps you took to make breaking into the global training industry a reality?

For me, my first step was connecting with global commerce organizations. The next bold step was to visit the desired country. Staying behind the computer was too safe and comfortable for me. I wanted to experience the culture and develop relationships. One thing I always share with my training team is you must learn the customer's culture to effectively train their team. Learning the protocol of traveling abroad was like developing a new training course for me. Once I accomplished that, I felt more knowledgeable about the culture. I can now share my experiences with other inspiring entrepreneurs looking to expand global.

This was a long-term goal, but what had you done over the years, leading up to your concentrated effort to help with your vision?

I continued to network with local global commerce organizations and businesses with prior global experience to help keep me current with the global trends. When you're an entrepreneur, learning becomes your lifestyle—it never ends.

Can you share a situation from your career that involved obstacles you had to overcome and share what you learned from those situations?

As a woman entrepreneur, I knew I would encounter constant obstacles, to say the least. But that only adds fuel to my perseverance. One situation I recall is being told by a former colleague that I should wait until I became a 'big business' before I started thinking about taking my company global. That was just the fuel I needed to prove them wrong. The more I began to research about small businesses going global the more I became aware of the possibilities for my company. That situation taught me to never allow someone to limit my capabilities based on my current position and to have a diverse group of mentors. Mentors serve for different purposes; no one mentor can serve all your needs. Today, I have more than one mentor who help me in different aspects of the growth of my business.

What words of advice do you have for other small businesses seeking to go global?

Start planning now; today, much of the growth trends are outside the United States. Whether small businesses realize it or not, their competitors are global as well as local. Diversity is real; it's not just a trending new word that makes a company appear politically correct. When small businesses begin to balance domestic and international markets, they can better manage their risk and leverage growth opportunities. Always think bigger than your present position. Stay connected, and join local global commerce associations. I would recommend the following organization to help get started entering the global industry: www.globalchamber.org.



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