

The Business Case for Business Travel

By Darlene Miller, President, Permac Industries

As the president of Permac Industries, I find the time to participate in a number of trips sponsored by the PMPA, the local Chamber of Commerce and even the Minnesota governor's recent trade mission to India. I've been to China, Ireland and a host of other destinations, all on business. Is there an expense? You bet. Is there a payoff? Absolutely.

Quality contacts. When was the last time you had the undivided attention of your state governor? When did you last spend a couple of hours just chatting with an existing customer or with a potential customer? When have you sat down with other businesspeople, in your industry or not, and had enough time to thoroughly discuss common issues, concerns and remedies that you or your businesses face?



When I travel, these quality contacts (connections) with my fellow travelers give me a rich payoff in new ideas. The opportunity to connect over shared concerns and to spend time without the interruptions of the daily routine has given my company stronger ties to my customers, vendors and colleagues in the industry.

The ability to connect with elected officials and share the view from my business' perspective is another benefit that I can't "dollarize," but it has benefited my company. These connections have paid real dividends to Permac Industries.

Actual business. Every year, some portion of our customer base will depart for many and varied reasons. The lowest global price currently available in Asia (specifically China and India) has

drained many precision machined parts customers from the North American market.

Traveling with the PMPA's study mission to China in 2003 gave me the contacts and the understanding to develop some business relationships that help Permac Industries get to "yes!" when the RFQ comes in for a precision part at a China price.

China sourcing is not a major part of our business. But the lessons learned as we develop our global footprint make Permac a stronger and more reliable company, even on our domestic business.

Future business. The serendipity of whom you meet on a trip is another factor that creates an opportunity for your company. Being seen in far-flung destina-

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tions tells potential customers that your company has the resources to be a first-rate supplier. It also tells them that you are living your attitude of continuous improvement — especially when they catch you at a Global Best Practices Summit where they are presenting.



We are in the process of a number of qualifications for new products as a result of my having been “in the right place at the right time,” which means someplace other than my office fussing over day-to-day details.

In 2003, China was the up-and-coming economy and workshop to the world. I’ve just returned from 10 days in India, and I’m certain that we’ll be ahead of the curve in dealing with the consequences of India’s growth and its potential as both a customer and supplier in the future.

A manager’s job is to both anticipate and create the future vision,

not just put out fires. Traveling broadens the inputs and helps me see an entirely different world of opportunity than the folks that stay in their offices.

My employees. The employees at Permac benefit from my travels as well. Besides benefiting from the obvious growth of business and its strength based on new orders and improved communications, my employees grow a little more every time I hit the road, or more correctly, the airport.

Having great employees and managers is just the beginning. You have to give them the opportunity to grow. They need to be responsible for a bit more than they might be comfortable with if they are to achieve their best. With you unavailable for immediate consultation, they learn to consult with others and make great decisions to get the job done.

My travels have been the catalyst that has transformed my staff into veterans who can make the right decisions, even when I’m on the other side of the world.

My customers. The real winners, of course, are my customers. They know that Permac Industries is up to speed on Global Best Practices. They saw me at the International Best Practices Summit held in Dublin 2 years ago. They know that my company has seen how their parts can be made (in China, in Europe and in India), as well as by North American methods. They know that we will help them select the process routing that makes the best business sense for them while

assuring compliance with their needs. They also know that we can be flexible and that with us, they get more choices — a world of choices, to be exact.

What I get out of travel. In 2003, the entire industry was in a somber and fearful mood as we watched more and more jobs and customers head to China. As a result of my travels to China on the PMPA study mission, as well as my later trips, I found out the realities about manufacturing overseas. I was able to see what kinds of parts were suitable for manufacture there and which made more sense to continue making in North America.

So, instead of fear and foreboding, I got optimism and expertise. Everywhere I have been, I have found that the people are really nice and that, people-to-people, we can communicate and share our good will.

I have found that the world is filled with cheerful, positive, optimistic people — from the poorest person on the street in Mumbai, to the people practicing Tai Chi in the parks in Shanghai, to the folks in the pub in Dublin. And that makes me cheerful, positive and optimistic, too.

For everything else, I guess, there’s MasterCard.

