

U.S. Commercial Offices Part of \$43Bln Trade

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February 21, 2012

The  Moscow Times

A handful of commercial officers at local U.S. diplomatic offices have done their discreet part — that included asking a lot of questions — for American and Russian mutual trade to reach a record high of \$43 billion last year.

As the Russian economy recovered from the global downturn, a total of 15 officers and specialists of the U.S. Commercial Service in Moscow and St. Petersburg provided an increasingly popular conduit for U.S. businesses that seek new deals here.

One of the top two fee-based services provided worldwide — and Russia is not an exception — is International Company Profile, said John McCaslin, minister counselor for commercial affairs at the U.S. Embassy. It helps an American company to reduce risks by ordering a background check of its potential Russian partner company, including its management, financial conditions and business connections.

"We go out to do face-to-face interviews with Russian companies," McCaslin said. "We ask a lot of questions."

The profile incorporates any available information from Dunn & Bradstreet, a New Jersey company that holds a global database of more than 130 million companies.

The U.S. government charges a fee of as little as \$350 to small and medium-sized enterprises that have never done exports before and use the service for first time. The bill goes up somewhat for the other small and medium-sized companies, and further increases for large companies.

Finding a match for an American exporter or investor is the other service that generates the most demand, McCaslin said.

A small manufacturer of industrial flameless heaters from the U.S. Midwest, one of last year's new entrants to Russia, sold two of them, worth \$106,000, last month to a dealer it found through the matchmaking Golden Key Service. The U.S. company first contacted the Commercial Service last June and received introductions to several potential Russian partners before the end of the year.

Buying the service, small and medium-sized companies pay a bill that ranges from \$350 to \$700, again depending on their export record. The fee increases for large enterprises.

The work for the trade staff at the embassy and the St. Petersburg Consulate usually starts when they get a request through their website or the network of about 100 Export Assistance Centers back in the United States.

Free original research by staff may precede any fee-based services, as was the case with the heaters producer from the Midwest. Identifying major industry players and opportunities, the research comes from some of the five American commercial officers and nine Russian commercial specialists that are each assigned to industry sectors and spend much of their time out and about, collecting information and building contacts at conferences and other events that bring together business executives.

"If we think we can find a Russian partner, we do that fee-based service," McCaslin, who is in charge of the team, said about the Golden Key offer.

As part of the package, the U.S. Commercial Service arranges appointments — typically four per day — at the offices of Russian companies that are potential partners, provides market research on the relevant sector and hands over information like the size of the company and the number of years it's been in business.

Before the sale of the heaters, a U.S. commercial officer also counseled the American company's president on payment and financing options when he was in Moscow.

American businesses have kept up their interest in the Russian market this year, too.

"It's been steady," McCaslin said. "Everybody remains very, very busy with inquiries."

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