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KNOW HOW

Develop an export mentality

It is all very well to work with a pumped-up export manager who gets excited about finding new business opportunities overseas, but the entire company needs to be committed to export success. Brian Powell, managing director of the Victorian manufacturer John Brown Hosiery, which exports socks (mainly to the United States) runs his company on the three Ps — product, people and persistence.

Powell's exporting journey began 24 years ago, when he was involved in a management buyout of a sock factory in Kyneton, in regional Victoria. As local markets dwindled, he knew the company had to export to survive. "We got everyone committed," says Powell. "Their livelihood depended on it." Today, the turnover is approaching \$10 million and the business employs 65 people. About 35% of its sales comes from export markets, mainly in the United States, through retailers that include the Nordstrom department store chain and the men's wear store Paul Stuart. The company's star product is an innovative sock made of Italian cashmere, using Japanese teflon to reinforce the heel and toe. The socks have a cult following and sell for \$US70 in the US. Export sales have been boosted by The Australian Trading Company, which markets John Brown

Hosiery products in the US. In Australia, the company makes socks for Florsheim, Country Road and other well-known brands. "We persisted and persisted, growing slowly," Powell says. He believes that exporting has given the company a huge morale boost. In November, Powell told his staff that the company had won a contract to make casual socks for Nordstrom. He holds monthly meetings with all staff to report on the business, and when overtime is required to complete orders, the company holds a "family day" for staff to wind down afterwards.

Powell has tried to make all his staff feel involved in the company's export strategy, but many companies that want to export do not have the time or the people to do the work. According to the Australian Industry Group, many businesses make the mistake of investigating export opportunities in the slow trading months of January and February. Then, when local orders pick up, they struggle to manage their time and are unable to persist with an export strategy.

An AIG spokesman says: "You need to put the people in place to do the work. You need to work out who is responsible for what, and make them all feel part of the game."

ALL TOGETHER

How to create an export attitude:

- **Make all staff a part of the export strategy.**
- **Keep staff informed about the company's progress.**
- **Be realistic about what the company can manage.**

EMILY ROSS