When it comes to global sales...

Local exporters ‘get it’

BY DENISE M. ZIEGLER
For the Tribune

From pulse crops to software, farm machinery and other goods, some North Dakota businesses are really “getting it” when it comes to foreign markets.

Brian Dahl, vice president of Amity Technology LLC, of Fargo, has been in the export business since about 1992 through his and his brother’s former company, Concord Inc., exporting Concord Air Seeders.

Concord was acquired by Case Corporation in 1996, but the Dahls kept their sugar beet equipment line and began a new company, Amity Technology Inc., the same year.

“We started exporting the sugar beet equipment in 2001,” Dahl said. “Back in 2001, our export balance was very small. We just sold a couple machines. But that has changed.”

Likewise, Justin Flaten, co-owner of IM Grain Inc., of Garrison, and his father, Marvin, started IM Grain in 2001. In 2009, they purchased an old elevator and began cleaning and bagging all grains, rather than operating as a typical elevator.

“We began shipping in January 2004,” Flaten said. “Now, in 2006, we deal primarily in exports, and our biggest export destination last year was India. India relies heavily on pulse crops, such as lentils and peas, which is what we handle.”

Flaten’s company exports lentils to Brazil, Spain and Italy.

that, for his particular commodities, the markets are largely international. There just isn’t as much of a demand for dry peas and lentils in the U.S.

For Dahl, while there is a U.S. market for sugar beet harvesting equipment, there are also huge markets overseas, their largest balance — meaning we sold $20 million more than we imported. We import very little for manufacturing our products.”

And business is good.

Flaten began exporting through trading companies, but has started working more directly with buyers to capture a better feel for the market, as sometimes trade companies would buy a lot — and sometimes not much. We needed to keep running, and now we know the market and have our own network of overseas buyers, although we still work with trade companies.

and the Ukraine to build relationships with local buyers.

“I used to train local, users, and dealers, operators and repair people how to use and fix the product. We even established a parts depot so repair parts for machines could be bought locally,” Dahl said, adding that many customers overseas were not used to the service and attention that customers here in the States expect.

“We get repeat business that has steadily grown. It is important to have a good relationship with customers, a personal trust relationship — and that doesn’t happen overnight,” Dahl said.

One of the first things Amity did when it began exporting was redesign their product for efficient shipping.

“It had to be packaged and knocked down to fit inside a shipping container,” Dahl said. A big hassle in exporting from North Dakota, Flaten added, is shipping. “Everything we ship is sent one way or another to the ports — west or east coast — via rail.”

He said we need reliable, competitively priced shipping and thinks the multimodal facilities being constructed in Minot and Bismarck will benefit businesses.

“We’d have a choice to source load the containers,” Flaten said. “It would help ensure the integrity of the product if we loaded here and products didn’t need to be reloaded on the coast. Although we have had no specific problems with the current system, it would really help with higher-end buyers if we could.”