

Women find foreign markets a 'challenge'

BY CINDY BARTH
Contributing Writer

Three years ago, Dena Falken faced a tough decision about what to do with her career. She had finished an internship with a prestigious law firm in Milan, Italy, but wasn't sure whether she wanted to return to the United States to pursue a career.

In the meantime, Falken was asked to do some private consulting for various attorneys in northern Italy. She quickly recognized a need these attorneys had: they needed to learn and comprehend the exact terminology of legal English.

Opportunity knocked, and Falken opened the door to form a company called Legal-Ease International Inc., becoming one of many women working in international business.

And like many women, she has encountered her share of difficulties due to one simple factor: gender.

"The first difficulty I faced was the fact that I was 26 years old and a woman," Falken says. "You've got to understand that in Italy, you're not a *real* lawyer until you're over 35."

She says she remembers her first seminar when 10 to 15 attorneys came in, looked around the room and wondered who the instructor was.

"Let me tell you, a few eyebrows raised when I introduced myself," Falken says.

Falken's experience is not uncommon for women in international business. Many cultures relegate women to a secondary role in society — which makes for some interesting conflicts in trying to do business.

"I've learned that you have to have three things: humor, a good attitude and commitment," Falken says.

She says her experiences have been quite interesting at times — being propositioned or asked to meet with clients to discuss "private" matters — but Falken admits she loves the work.

"It really doesn't matter what a man's or woman's position is. If they want to be gross, they will," Falken says.

Donna Cialone, president of International Marketing Resources Inc., is involved in global export and sales opportunities. She also has faced some interesting times as a woman involved in international business in the former Soviet republics, Croatia and Slovenia.

"Overall, however, my experiences have been positive,"

Cialone says. "Most of the time, you get respect because you're from the U.S. If you present yourself in a professional manner, you can make a good impression, even in places where it's unusual for a woman to be involved in business."

Falken agrees on that point and remembers how she worked hard to present a professional appearance, in the way she dressed and how she conducted seminars.

"Women lawyers in Italy run around in short mini-skirts and long, dangly earrings — not exactly how we think of lawyers here. I made sure I dressed in a different

manner," Falken says.

This formula for doing business brought great success to Legal-Ease and now allows Falken to operate in several important industrial cities in northern Europe, having taught seminars to more than 300 attorneys.

Cialone says she believes her acceptance has been made easier because so many people worldwide look to the United States with great admiration.

"I know it would be a different story if I were doing business someplace like Japan or the Middle East where women's

roles are quite subdued," Cialone says.

Both women say that acceptance of women has come a long way and, as more women become involved in international business ventures, acceptance is likely to grow.

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Linda Parks, a senior tax manager at KPMG Peat Marwick and a member of the office's international tax department, believes women may actually have some advantages over men.

"I think we forget that sometimes women can be more flexible and cooperative," Parks says. "That can be a definite plus if the person you're dealing with knows you're willing to work things out."

So, as the business world becomes more globally interconnected, women will have an important role in the stakes. Falken has some advice for women considering a career in international business.

"The best way to approach doing business is not to be offended by mannerisms. What's okay in one culture may be totally unheard of in another," Falken says. "Don't take offense as a woman and assume that someone is being too intimate with you until you know where they're coming from as part of their nationality."

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