



> Christelle Damiens,
Exportia

Cristelle clear on Europe

A native of France, Christelle Damiens planned for a future in international business by becoming fluent in three languages and engaging in work experience in Germany, England and India. She also enjoyed a structured work placement in Australia, she says, by fulfilling a desire not by chance or circumstance.

"I have a sales background and a passion for export development," says Christelle in her lilting accent. "I could see a need for personalised and expert assistance to Australian companies wishing to export. France and Germany are often overlooked in favour of the USA, India or China so my role is educational and connective."

Christelle is MD of Exportia, a specialist consulting firm she set up four years ago. With a focus on IT and high-tech companies, Christelle says many smaller Australian companies are surprised to find France is the fifth largest economy in the world, offering tremendous opportunities for the right company.

"There are surprises on both sides," says Christelle. "French and German companies, with whom we deal, are often surprised to find the most innovative software, hardware or telecommunication solution is designed and manufactured in Australia, often right here in Adelaide."

"Exportia has been specialising in electronics, medical, and environmental technologies, but as we expand and become better known doors into other IT and high-tech areas are being opened. SA companies have a dynamic opportunity if they are export ready and responsive; the door only opens once."

Christelle says European companies are harder to interest, but once their attention has been gained exporters need to be responsive and ready to perform.

"The biggest mistake some companies make is to undermine the value of a regular local presence and this is exactly what we propose to overcome with our Europe-based team," Christelle says.

"The culture is different in Europe. In Australia people will give you a go; over there you have to work to get an appointment. On the up-side, if you get an appointment it does mean the company is interested; they won't be wasting your time."

One of the challenges in establishing Exportia has been to develop a model that performs both here and in Europe. Christelle employs a small team of like-minded and expert professionals in Europe to act as advisers between Christelle and Exportia's Australian-based clients and the European companies who may require innovative IT and hi-tech solutions.

"Communication is excellent between here and Europe but inefficiencies can develop when Australian companies are not suitably responsive," she warns. "I am very hands-on with clients although I am also still perfecting the system that has been evolving for four years. Customer satisfaction is paramount in this business and invariably we work on a long-term basis with our clients. I am still working with my first clients because their business is offering more to new European clients; so the process is as continual as it is increasing."

Christelle has been appointed as a French Foreign Trade Adviser to the French Government. This position is an acknowledgement of the value Exportia creates and to the credibility Christelle has developed with major French and German companies.

"The model I have developed is designed to help define and evaluate that an Australian company has the right product," she explains. "Usually such products will have a patent which is a good indication of the level of innovation; European companies value that."

"Another challenge has been to set up a structure that allows Australian companies to be credible in the European market. Reputable European companies seek to deal with professional IT and hi-tech designers; they are not interested in replicating an idea or a design themselves. Therefore, even though it's harder to get an appointment, the longer term relationships tend to be more solid and trusting."

With a one-year-old daughter, Maya, Christelle is juggling the sleepless nights of motherhood and working across global time zones. She must also be trained in the technologies for which she is negotiating sales.

"I love sales and I love export. Exportia is testament to the innovative nature of South Australian companies, and to be part of their global expansion and relationship building is why I went in to business in the first place," she says.

"My next challenge is to expand in to Asia with broader IT and hi-tech solutions so I won't be getting too much sleep for quite a while."