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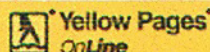
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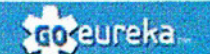
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**How to export to an uncertain world**

By Sam Leone

Lately the news for Australia's exporting small and medium enterprises - who make up 77 percent of our exporters - has been a confusing mix of good and bad.

On the downside, the world's two largest economies, the USA and Japan, are showing negative growth; there's a severe slowdown in Europe; the Western world is in an open-ended war with terrorism and our travel trade figures are down.

On the upside, our balance of trade is still positive, with exports outstripping imports in September by \$545 million - up from August's \$71 million trade surplus.

And on the home front, official figures show manufacturing production, new orders and deliveries continuing to rise; a rebound in business credit and only a slight pullback in the housing sector.

So can the Australian economy keep up this significant momentum? And how can you, as an exporter, continue to plan with confidence?

Austrade's chief economist Tim Harcourt has likened Australia's world export environment to the ocean - at the best of times there can be erratic waves and dangerous currents.

"Because of uncertainty, you don't know whether your next move will put you in a rip or in calmer waters," he says.

But he is upbeat on the current outlook, pointing out that Australian exporters have been through big changes before and not only survived, but thrived.

"However, I don't want to say that there isn't uncertainty out there, we've got to be realistic - but Australia is in better shape than most other countries with a strong domestic economy and the things that help exporters are quite strong in Australia," he said.

In the face of reduced business travel because of the international airline situation, Australia is lucky to be wired up strongly with sophisticated communications and online systems.

The diversity of Australia's exports and export markets is another strength. We should see growth in the communications areas and high-skilled manufacturing.

Australia is now developing strong knowledge-based exporting companies in areas such as medical research, pharmaceuticals, film and video production, higher education and information storage.

However, Harcourt he advises caution for the travel trade.

"Tourism is difficult because, even though we're seen as a safe and low-cost destination, we could be affected by the global drop-off in overall tourist numbers," he said.

So what's his advice to small and medium enterprises who are already exporting?

The most important thing is for the enterprise to be committed to exporting, committed to their staff and to building relationships in other countries.

"Research shows that companies which do the right thing by their workers and in their own relationships within the company and that keep their technology up-to-date tend to do well in overseas markets," Harcourt said.

It is also important to know that there are agencies - such as Austrade - out there which are set up to help and that you are not by yourself. With the current uncertain world environment he says it's even more important to use whatever expertise is available.

Austrade recently had their trade commissioners from the USA and Pakistan in Australian talking to the exporters.

"Size is not a barrier to exporting as small enterprises can join supply chains at many points. An example of this have been some of the automotive parts manufacturers supplying to the larger companies for export".

It is also vital for small companies to network effectively as they can often be locked out of

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