

Crossing Invisible Barriers at National Borders

By Philip Crawford

Small Business Series

Take a Californian who speaks fluent Japanese and French and whose interests center on fitness, nutrition and the beauty industry. Put her in Paris.

Factor in an education that includes a bachelor's degree in biology from Stanford University and a master's degree in business administration from Harvard. What type of company might she create?

The answer is a tiny international consulting firm whose founder, Laurel Skurko, has proved that cross-border entrepreneurship need not be the sole domain of multinational corporations with armies of researchers, lawyers and accountants. Indeed, Linc International has only one full-time employee: Miss Skurko.

Linc's stock in trade is identifying ideas and products that have been successful in one country and finding ways to bring them into others. While its specialty is introducing U.S. products to Japanese consumers, it also builds bridges between Europe and Japan and from the United States to Europe.

For example, Linc recently orchestrated the arrival in France of Domino's Pizza, the American delivery staple. Working for two partners, one French and one American, who sought the rights to establish Domino's franchises in France, Linc conducted a competitive analysis of the fast-growing, French pizza-delivery market and aided its clients in developing a 10-year business plan.

The partners were rewarded with Domino's master-franchise rights for France over several competitors.

Linc's evolution has mirrored Miss Skurko's personal muses and her relationship with Japan, where she moved at age 13 - "before I'd ever tasted sushi" - when her father's company posted him there. Returning to Tokyo after four years at Stanford (where she had started a business called Stanford Aerobics, which offered exercise classes and lectures on health), she noticed some changes in Japanese culture.

"Japanese dietary and exercise habits had deteriorated," she said. "They had become more American. I decided I had a mission: to be the person behind a new fitness movement in Japan."

Her timing was fortuitous. Ito-Yokado Co., the huge Japanese retailer, was then planning to open a chain of health clubs in its stores, and it hired Miss Skurko as a consultant on matters such as how to design aerobics classes, who to hire as instructors and how to motivate clients.

Gradually, Miss Skurko developed a reputation that led to appearances on fitness-oriented television shows and to her writing of a regular column entitled Laura on Health for the Asahi Weekly news magazine.

('Laurel,' she explained, is nearly impossible for Japanese people to pronounce).

Linc helped bring American-made stair-climbing machines, known well to health-club denizens, to Japan by introducing them to a medical-equipment company that was testing cardiac rehabilitation aids. She also played the middleman in franchising the Michigan-based Smoke Stoppers smoking-cessation program to a Japanese company.

"The aim is to be the link between the American business person and the Japanese business person," Miss Skurko said, adding that she returned to business school in order to learn U.S.-style marketing. She came to France in 1991 to work with Procter & Gamble Co. on increasing its French market share. She then decided to base Linc in France, where she has relatives.

One of Miss Skurko's current clients is a major Japanese cosmetics concern. Her task, she said, is to "show them how the American idea of beauty is evolving and how they can make it attractive and marketable to Japanese women." Another client is a company that bought Vincent van Gogh's final residence, northwest of Paris, and is marketing it as a tourist destination.

Linc's product typically includes the preparation of lengthy research reports aimed at helping clients gauge the potential of their products in overseas markets. Miss Skurko receives time-based consultancy fees, out of which she hires part-time help to carry out research, report translations, and legal and accounting tasks.

Linc has, of course, suffered some setbacks. One was a recent attempt to sell the smoking-cessation program in France. "I don't think," Miss Skurko said, "that the French market is quite ready for the idea."

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