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Business

Back from Brazil: Local companies say trade mission a success

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Fred Lipp, of Bernstein, Shur, Sawyer & Nelson, center, and Kathie Leonard of Auburn Manufacturing Inc., right, meet with a Brazilian businessman recently at the State of Maine Reception in Sao Paulo, Brazil. - Submitted photo

There was interest in spending time abroad at Hebron Academy, in buying collapsible food concentrate drums from Packgen and wearing Auburn-made shoes on oil-drilling platforms in the Pacific.

"Our boots are engineered so they provide very, very good slip resistance in all temperatures," said Carl Spang, president of Falcon Performance Footwear. "You don't want to be slipping around on an oil rig."

Spang and a dozen others returned a week ago from the Maine International Trade Center's latest trade mission to Brazil and Chile. Eleven companies made the trip, five of them — Tex Tech Industries, Auburn Manufacturing, Falcon, Hebron Academy and Packgen — from greater Lewiston-Auburn.

"The experience was very good," said Spang, who also found a natural market for the company's mining boots. "We have come away with two very good possibilities for Chile and Brazil, Chile is nearer-term. We're hoping to line up a distributor by January."

Noah Love, an admissions counselor and Hebron grad from the class of 2007, said Chile was a slightly harder sell, families tend to keep children close, but contacts made in Brazil have promise. Twenty-five percent of the private school's student body is international. Two students from Brazil attend now.

"In Brazil, if you have the resources to do so, it's sort of a given that you're going to send your kid to a year abroad," Love said.

MITC President Janine Bisailon-Cary said the center has organized at least one trade mission a year since 1996. Using people on the ground, the 11 companies booked 105 match-making meetings in advance with potential buyers or business partners. The trip spanned Nov. 12 to 19.

"I think the quality of the companies are some of the best we've ever had participating," she said. "There was a big demand for advanced materials or advanced textiles. It . . . made me realize there's still quite a niche in L-A."

Packgen President John Lapoint sent Dan Forte on that company's behalf.

"(Brazil) is one of those up-and-coming countries," he said. "Between the (Petrobras) refinery and food concentrates, it really fits us well. Dan is opening some doors for us, so we're excited about that."

Kathie Leonard, CEO and owner of Auburn Manufacturing, made 10 sales calls in each country in the space of three days.

"My goal was to find out what the mining industry in Chile might be using for hotwork protection. We've got a lot of breadth in our product line that appealed to them," Leonard said. "I also found they really like buying American products. It's always a pleasure to hear that when you go away."

She was most surprised at the reception received by a modular insulation kit, a product cut to fit tight spaces or cover odd-shaped valves and pipe components. Leonard overcame the language barrier by playing a YouTube video that showed off how it works.

"Already one of the companies I called has come to me about that product, asking more questions, needs more technical help," Leonard said. "Music to my ears."

Representatives from Bernstein Shur, Hydro International, Invest in Maine, Maine Central Institute, Mathews Brothers, Southworth International Group and Yale Cordage were also part of the Brazil-Chile mission.