

Going global is risky business, X-Rite VP says

Thursday, May 11, 2006

By Rob Kirkbride

The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Want to succeed in international business?

Be prepared for the fight of your life.

That was the message delivered Wednesday by X-Rite Inc. Vice President Joan Andrew to those gathered for the World Trade Week Conference Wednesday at Grand Valley State University's Loosemore Auditorium.

"Nothing is harder, and nothing will test you more than getting out there on the world stage to compete," she said.

But Andrew was not trying to dissuade potential global business leaders.

Indeed, she offered words of encouragement and examples of how X-Rite, which makes color-matching equipment and software, boosted its presence and profits overseas.

"It is risk-taking," she said. "It is all about making those bets and taking those chances."

Going international does not happen overnight. Andrew said it took X-Rite about eight years to streamline its operations.

And the company learned a lot along the way.

"We had surprises that we encountered and issues along the way," she said.

The company started simply by paying attention to international sales and making it a priority.

It identified its customers and their specific needs. Global business became a priority for the company's leaders. It localized its products so workers in China or Germany could operate the machines in their native languages.

Between 1996 and 2005, X-Rite went from two international offices to 20. Global sales also increased from \$84 million to \$131 million during that time.

"We wouldn't be the X-Rite we are today without the growth of international business," she said.

The company's global growth continues. X-Rite is purchasing its Switzerland-based rival, Gretag Macbeth.

"There is no question in our minds that international is going to be a big growth driver for us for years to come," Andrew said.

The message hit home for Dave Ruthben, president of Special Tooling System in Walker.

His company, which sells specialized machines, is trying to increase its presence globally.

"I want to learn the lessons from those that went before me," he said.

Ron Colton, director of Hope Network Industries, hopes to learn how to better offer his company's services as a "low-cost option" for those in West Michigan who might be looking to move production overseas.

"We want businesses to know that we can provide work without crossing the Pacific," he said.

The speech was part of a day's worth of events at GVSU, including the International Business Conference "Competing with Low-Cost Countries."