

# FROM AIR TO H<sub>2</sub>O

PURIFIED WATER-MAKER TAPS WORLD MARKETS

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Even in the driest part of the world, Hisham Fawzi's worldwide government customers don't wait for rain to quench people's thirst. Then again, neither does Fawzi. After all, why worry about cottonmouth when your business is making drinking water out of thin air?

"The lack of drinking water is a major problem around the world," Fawzi says. "In some regions like Africa and the Middle East, lack of water is a problem, while in places like Asia and Latin America much of the water is contaminated."

That's where Fawzi comes in. As President and Chairman of Excel Holdings, a small firm in Leesburg, Virginia,

Fawzi develops and markets a patented line of machines that convert moisture from the air into drinkable water.

"I have a tough time convincing people until they actually see it," Fawzi says. "It sounds like science fiction, but our Water Finder machines are real, affordable and working to quench the thirst of customers around the world."

That's billions of thirsty people. Excel Holdings currently markets its products in 14 countries with many more potential customers in the waiting. Most of his customers are foreign governments or international organizations, which often finance water purification efforts.

"You wouldn't believe the range of projects and possibilities we have for our water finder machines," Fawzi says. "In the United Arab Emirates, women wash their hair with bottled water because there's too much chlorine in the tap water; in Mexico, water is often rationed for bathing and drinking; while in countries like Singapore the water treatment plants, while adequate, do not produce good-tasting water."

Then there is the Middle east where Fawzi is working to supply major oil companies and schools with purified water. Another possibility is the Island



of Maldives east of India and Sri Lanka, where the population frequently gets sick because their only source of water is a desalination plant.

Maybe it's his calling, but Fawzi has always had an interest in combining his entrepreneurial skills with a service to humanity. After leaving his former sales position, he pondered some ideas and decided to address the problem of available drinking water around the world. In 1997, he bought the rights to a patent for a "Water Finder" prototype. Taking development further, he worked with the University of Maryland's Environmental Engineering Department to develop several machines, the most powerful producing up to 5,000 gallons of purified drinking water a day.

That's great, but what about the marketing? While he saw some demand in the United States for his Water Finder machines, particularly in California and Florida, Fawzi knew that overseas markets were the key to success. Yes, but exporting requires lots of diligence, right?

"I knew our product had a lot of export potential early on," Fawzi recalls. "My real problem was locating quality distributors who could make sales and service our customers."

Then Fawzi thought: Why not contact the U.S. Commercial Service and its Northern Virginia Export Assistance Center? So he did. Then Commerce's trade experts went to work, suggesting a Gold Key program that set up appointments with pre-screened distributors in key markets such as Singapore.

Fawzi not only shook hands with his new distributors, he cut some deals. "The results were really quite impressive," he says. "We eventually ended up signing a distributorship agreement that covers six countries in Asia — China, Thailand, Indonesia, Australia, Singapore, Brunei — and our first

export sale, a contract worth \$50 million in Singapore."

Flush with his first success, Fawzi later signed up for a Commercial Service-supported trade mission and show to Mexico. There, he ended up making a critical contact that eventually led to the signing of a \$35 million sale of the firm's five gallon-a-day Water Finder units to a distributor in Mexico.

"I love having a crowded booth full of potential customers and that's exactly what I got, thanks to the Commerce Department," he says. "And that Gold Key, it makes me feel stronger when I'm selling and the buyer senses that legitimacy."

All told, it has been a very good year for Excel Holdings. In the last six months, the company has made sales of \$85 million and now has distributors covering 13 international markets. With several different models, the company is quickly developing a worldwide distribution channel for its patented potable water-producing technology.

"I'm looking at Asia and the Middle East as key areas for future sales, particularly Korea, Saudi Arabia and Israel" Fawzi says. "Growth is good, but my real challenge is maintaining our rigorous quality control standards, that's a priority."

For Excel Holdings a diversifies company, which employs over 20 people in its Water Finder division, meeting international demand for fresh water will be perhaps the biggest challenge. A deal with the Whirlpool Corporation to manufacture the Water Finder units, as well as tentative plans to open a new manufacturing facility in Virginia for the Aquasphere units means that Excel Holdings will continue to rise with the export tide.

But Excel has already met one key challenge. This past November, Commerce Secretary Don Evans presented Fawzi with the U.S. Commercial Service's

new Export Achievement Certificate, an award recognizing companies who have attained their first export sale.

Fawzi's advice to other businesses: "Don't be so apprehensive about selling globally. The longer U.S. firms wait to sell to other markets, the bigger advantage we give to our foreign competitors."

"Get out there and travel," he says. "I wetted a lot of appetites with my products." ■