

Press



Worldly wordsmith Silas Lyons - Telegram-Tribune

SAN LUIS OBISPO -- Working simultaneously for clients on several continents can tend to warp your sense of place and distance.

So it comes as no big surprise when San Luis Obispo translator and entrepreneur Amy Kardel is talking about Hollywood over lunch at Cafe Roma and refers to it as "just down the street."

That's by way of explaining how it was natural for her to develop an interest in translating screen plays for Hollywood, adding film companies to the technology firms already on her client list.

From her "office home" in San Luis Obispo, Kardel operates Global Accent, a company that uses the Internet extensively to patch together a network of about 50 translators and serve a global clientele with business translation services.

At age 29, she's achieved a dream sought by many in San Luis Obispo County, managing to bring a talent home to the Central Coast, where she grew up, and not sacrifice her career for her quality of life. It's a concept she even has a pithy phrase for: "Live locally, work globally."

Kardel won't say how much money Global Accent makes, but sales have grown 25 percent annually since she started devoting full-time attention to the business in 1995. "We're doing really well, put it that way," she says.

"We" is almost a misnomer. Kardel is the sole employee of Global Accent, although she maintains a broad stable of contracting translators (she personally only handles German to English translation). The business may grow to employ other people, she says, but for now it's where she wants it to be.

Kardel first developed an interest in travel and languages when she was 15, attending San Luis High School. Through an exchange program between San Luis and a high school in Stuttgart, Germany, she got a taste of life abroad and was hooked.

She went back to Germany whenever she could and majored in the language at Berkeley largely for the sake of the travel opportunities it presented. Her masters is in Germanic languages from Washington University.

After earning that degree, Kardel started working for global electrical engineering and electronics giant Siemens in Munich. But living in Germany didn't have long-term appeal.

"All the time I was looking back over my shoulder at San Luis and trying to figure out a way to come back," she recalls.

The explosion in popularity of the Internet provided the answer.

Kardel left Munich in 1995, after living and working there for three years. She returned to San Luis Obispo and pushed on with her education, commuting to the Monterey Institute of International Studies while pursuing Global Accent full-time. She launched a Web site for the service and used the Internet extensively for communication, including sending finished translations to clients around the world.

Such messages are sent in encrypted form, meaning they're scrambled with a code that can only be unlocked by the intended recipient.

At the time, Kardel worked 40 hours a week and went to school full time. Even that proved not to be enough. The business became successful enough that she left the Monterey Institute before finishing her MBA in international business so she could devote more time to Global Accent.

Now, she and her husband have two children and she works 60-hour weeks.

She compares the rigorous schedule to athletic achievement.

"Not everybody's cut out to be a triathlete, and not everybody's cut out to be an entrepreneur, either," she says. "You're up at three in the morning on the computer, you're working the weekend, whatever it takes. If you didn't, it wouldn't work."

Kardel has built a strong client base largely through the good old fashioned art of networking. She still does work for Siemens, as well as Swiss watchmaker Swatch and other large European companies.

Locally, her client list includes SAES Pure Gas, Dega Technology and the law firm of Sinsheimer, Schiebelhut and Baggett. Referrals are a major chunk of her business.

That's how Jennifer Sawyer, who's in charge of marketing communications for SAES, got in touch with Kardel. She was recommended by a friend.

SAES, which does business with technology companies all over the world, had been through "all kinds of frustration" with larger translation services in Chicago and New York, Sawyer said.

Often, proofreaders in branch offices would find major translation errors, she said.

"It's very important, especially for a high-tech company, that when you present yourself the information be highly accurate," Sawyer said. "We haven't had that issue with Amy's work. It's been very accurate."

It's also better service, she said.

"I really prefer to use local businesses when I can. And I find that the level of service tends to be better than you'll get with a larger company because they're more interested in making the business relationship work."

Aside from personal contacts and referrals, Kardel said she's attracted a number of clients through her Web site (www.globalaccent.com). It allows prospects to request bids by filling out an online form, as well as offering basic information about the company.

"It's basically a Yellow Page ad that works to get people in, and tells them about me," Kardel says.

Her attachment to the Internet has done more than just help her recruit contract translators and potential customers, however. It's driven down the cost of doing business significantly, allowing more room for a profit margin.

"Courier bills and fax bills are part of the overhead, but they're not getting a big piece of the pie, thanks to the Internet," she says. "That's something that I was able to leverage to beat a lot of the big players, too."

The reference to competition is relatively rare from Kardel. For the most part, she doesn't consider it a significant issue. The translation industry is highly fragmented, she says, depending heavily on personal service and one-on-one communication.

"There's not really a giant," she says. Then, after a short pause, "maybe it'll be me."

Although Global Accent focuses on technology and film, Kardel's tasks aren't all software manuals and screen plays (none of which you'd recognize -- they haven't yet been developed into movies). Last year, she translated three German sci-fi novels into English.

And she's currently immersed in what may be the emotionally taxing project of her career.

Through a lawyer client in New York, Kardel was enlisted to translate reams of Holocaust-era documents to help in the process of tracking down rightful owners a half century after Jewish property was seized by the Nazis in Germany.

Many of the documents to be translated are wholesale listings written by the persecuted, itemizing property from the basement to the attic.

One sheet, composed in shaky handwritten script, was authored by a woman immediately before she was shipped to a concentration camp.

Even decades later, the stark pathos of the scrawled inventory lingered.

"It's a lot less sterile than a computer manual or a software interface," Kardel says. "One's a lot easier to work on, emotionally."

Beneath the emotion, though, the philosophical underpinnings are largely the same.

"What it does have in common is really the language, and conveying the meaning," Kardel says. "Any translation is really fascinating because you focus on, there's a writer and there's an audience. So it's really literary theory in a nutshell."

Global Accent is as big as it needs to be for now, she says. But place the emphasis on "for now."

Kardel says she's already turning away business, and she won't keep doing that indefinitely.

"It'll be there when I'm ready to go bigger," she says. "For me, right now, this is perfect. But I do see it taking off. That's the plan."

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