

EXPO NATION

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Export Nation - A Global Business Podcast

Export Nation provides informative and entertaining content highlighting America's export experts and trade-related news, successes, events and insights.



Sustainable Energy Company's Focused Export Outlook From Inception Leads To Multi Market Success

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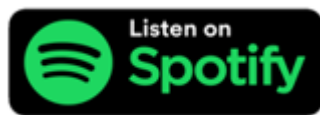
This episode of Export Nation, features Peter Agbro of IPP Global, a company that provides sustainable energy solutions with a focus on wind power, solar power, compressed natural gas, and energy storage. IPP Global has successfully exported to Brazil and countries throughout Africa.

Relevant Links

Company Information: IPP Global - www.ippgbl.com

Office: [U.S. Commercial Service Houston](#)

Senior International Trade Specialist: Brendan Kelly - Brendan.Kelly@trade.gov



Podcast Transcript

[Music] [00:00:02] Derrick: On this episode of Export Nation, we speak to Peter Agbro of IPP Global. A company that provides sustainable energy solutions with a focus on wind power, solar power, compressed natural gas, and energy storage. IPP Global has successfully exported to Brazil and countries throughout Africa.

Good morning. We'd like to start by having you tell us a little bit about yourself and the company and what you do.

[00:00:30] Peter Agbro: Good morning Derrick. My name is Peter Agbro, and I'd like to talk a bit about IPP Global. IPP Global is energy developer based in Houston, Texas. We are a company that was recently formed about two, three years ago and our primary focus is in the energy development business. We noticed that in the energy industry space there's been a major lack in the area of small-scale LNG development. What you do here on a regular basis are the large-scale energy-developed projects. We discovered that there's an available open space for smaller projects and that gave birth to our idea of developing projects in the small-scale gas processing, gas to power space where we actually develop small scale LNG solutions for power projects that can be located anywhere and can work without the increased cost of the infrastructure of pipelines using the virtual pipeline solution. That's one aspect of our business in the gas processing space. The other areas that we focus on are clean sustainable energy space like the wind turbines and the solar PV panels for power generation and energy storage as in batteries and other form of energy storage. That's IPP Global in a nutshell.

[00:02:32] Derrick: Okay. You said the company started around two, three years ago. Have you always been in this power energy space?

[00:02:41] Peter: The company was formed by three individuals with over 20 years of industry experience in various aspects of a business. For me, I've had over 22 years of working experience in the energy industry, or I would say if you look at the whole spectrum of the energy industry all the way from the upstream business via offshore all the way through to refining and power generation. I've had significant work experience in all that space handling things like gas turbines, compressors, and all the key components involved in the energy industry or the development of the gas supply business. Then the other members of the company have also heavily been involved with business development and the general business management and all the other aspects of the business. I'm more of the technical guy that covers the technical side of things.

[00:04:00] Derrick: How did you all get together? Did you already know each other?

[00:04:04] Peter: One of the key things for us at the very beginning was to ensure that we come together with the right chemistry and with the right goal in mind such that we know where we're heading and we can stay focused and we can get there. We've known ourselves for some years and we've always maintained contact. We discovered that we have this common goal to build something that can leave our footprint or can leave our mark in the world especially on the clean energy side of things. We discovered that that's an aspect of it that we want to satisfy and believe that there was a need and also demand for it when you look at the current global crisis in

terms of the environmental global crisis that we're currently facing.

[00:05:03] Derrick: Okay, perfect. Thank you. Maybe you could tell me how you were introduced to the US Commercial Service.

[00:05:11] Peter: Now, that's an interesting conversation. How I got introduced to the US Commercial Service. In the mid-2015, 2016 timeframe, the idea to form a company or to start a company came up and the question was what aspect of that industry should one focus on? In a bid to find out what's available out there, what can one do, I started off initially thinking, all right, maybe the food industry is a perfect example, trying to solve global hunger in the world as much as I can in my own little way. I started to look into agricultural exports. That's where I started from. In doing my research, I came across government agencies that can help exporters within the US. During that whole process I came across the US Commercial Services. I set up a meeting with the US Commercial Services folks and I had every intention to meet someone else in the office but the day I showed up to the office, the gentlemen I was supposed to meet wasn't in the office but I met Brendan Kelly. Now, he told me, hey, this guy's not here but we can sit down and talk. We talked and I told him back then I'm new to this.

Brendan went through the whole process of, okay, what exactly do you do? I told him a little bit about myself and somehow a light bulb came on in his head and he said, "Hey, look, if you've spent all your life in the energy industry, why not do something in the energy industry?" He said, hey, he's just saying it, it wasn't what I came there for but there is this Reverse Trade Mission that's happening in a couple of weeks. I'll send you the invite, you can come and after you attend tell us what you think. That was a Reverse Trade Mission with folks from Senegal and Mauritania that came to Houston. I attended that event and during the event, they talked about the energy shortage and the struggle with energy in the African continent. That was my light bulb moment. I then told myself, if my whole experience has been in the energy industry and that is where my strength lies, why do something else? That was how I started working with the US Commercial Services. That's how IPP Global started. Like I said, a lot of that was due to the outside-of-the-box approach that Brendan had to say, "Hey, look, you're a startup, why not focus on your strength kind of deal."

[00:09:14] Derrick: I really appreciate this story you give and I just want to tell you why. First, were you actually in business yet at that point when you went into the office?

[00:09:32] Peter: No, this was like six years ago, we weren't a business then.

[00:09:34] Derrick: Right. That's what makes this story really good because you'd be considered obviously not ready to export at that time. I think the foresight of Brendan to at least be able to say hey, you can come to this event and see what type of opportunities you could possibly be involved with in the future, I just think that was excellent because it helped you spawn the idea into this business that could actually benefit some global economies. I don't hear that too often just in my daily basis, going around with trade specialists.

That was really good to hear because I think that's an important point and probably a point I'm going to start bringing up to people around here. There's probably still things that people can attend, even if they're not set up for necessarily ready to export at least it'll open some eyes. That's a wonderful story and I appreciate you're telling me that. Then in what ways has the Commercial Service helped since then? Now did you start doing sales domestically when the business started, or did you start with a focus on global right away? I know that's two questions in one, but-

[00:11:03] Peter: Our focus went global right away because there was a major or we noticed there's a major pull from the African continent as international, to be precise. There's a major pull for US technology internationally and it's an easy entry or let's say fairly easy entry because there's a high demand for US technology as compared

to within the US itself. Within the US the technology is abundantly available and the competition is steep, but outside of the US is where the competition is less and there's a high demand for it. We started to plan for export almost immediately.

We had strategy sessions with Brendan. We sat down with Brendan to figure out how to chart that course of exports. That has led to Gold Key Services that we set up almost immediately with some of the countries that are out there. We started off with South Africa. That was the first country we did a Gold Key Service with. Working with the US Commercial Services gentlemen in South Africa in the energy space we organized our first virtual Gold Key Service. It was just before the pandemic hit actually. We were already thinking of trips going down to South African and doing it the traditional way, but just right about that time the pandemic hit. We did both South Africa and Egypt. Those are the two countries we did and we have to do those virtual more or less because then the pandemic came and travels were literally a no-no. That led to all securing partners who we're working with right now on potential projects in both South Africa and Egypt.

Also, following on the heels of that, we also started up a Gold Key Service with the folks in Brazil. Right now, we're in the middle of a proposal discussion on a small-scale LNG terminal in Brazil right now. That has led to projects coming along or coming on things that we are almost in the pipeline of executing. The Gold Key Service is a unique tool that not many companies in the US are aware of. I can categorically say, we probably wouldn't be where we are right now without that service because in such a short timeframe, we've been able to put in a bid for a \$160 million project in South Africa to supply natural gas to a company in South Africa.

We have this small-scale LNG terminal that we're currently discussing in Brazil. We have a flare reduction project that we are currently discussing in Egypt. That was as a result of a Reverse Trade Mission that the US Commercial Services had with folks from Egypt that was in January or February last year. Those are tools that the US Commercial Services have made available and I've seen results from them.

[00:15:42] Derrick: Did your first Gold Key meetings go as you expected, or were you surprised by anything?

[00:15:51] Peter: My first Gold Key Service was with South Africa and it went as planned and it was well done. I was really impressed with the service. We had two companies that we agreed to do business with and were willing to do business with us. We still stay in contact with them. One of them is still a major player with us. Right now, we are in process of securing an order to supply a gas turbine to South Africa, which it's one of those major achievements that we couldn't have secured without the Gold Key Service.

Now, not every aspect of the Gold Key Services always—I mean not everything goes nice and dandy all the time. There have been times that we've had to circle back on Gold Key Service. One of the things I would say, which to me is applause is having a US Commercial Service contact like Brendan here in Houston helps push things through. In the case of Egypt, the first go-round wasn't satisfactory done so he had to circle back and we had to rejig the whole process and it went well the second go-round. It's not always perfect, but there've been one or two like that. Brazil is also flawless. Everything went well and smooth with Brazil and all.

[00:17:56] Derrick: That brings us to some segue into any challenges you faced. Was that the biggest challenge you faced thus far, or have you faced any other challenges with exporting?

[00:18:09] Peter: So far that has been one of the biggest challenge. Now, when it comes to exporting, the other challenge that most companies face is there is a lot of uncertainty out there and the risk factor with doing business international is high. That's a known fact. US Commercial Services helps a great deal in reducing that risk, but they don't eliminate the risk. As such, when it comes to project financing, most especially project development financing, that's always a key aspect of it that is always crucial. Those have always been the challenge that we faced.

That's one aspect of it that I really would hope that the US Commercial Services or that entity or that group; US Commercial Service, USTDA or USAID as they promote US export, we also have to look for a way of funding development. USTDA tries as much as possible with the feasibility studies and pilot projects but then for you to get to the stage of a pilot project, there's a lot of development funding that needs to happen and that is some of those funding can be quite significant for just development. That doesn't mean the project is going to fly.

If you're spending \$5 to \$10 million just to develop a project, that's a huge cost that there has to be a way of helping companies cross that hurdle to make projects succeed. That is one of the challenge. That in itself is another challenge we faced with some of the projects that we know very well we had not only just the technical know-how to handle, we had the OEM backing for equipment on, we had everything in place but there's all this hurdle that were just a little bit too steep for us to cross.

[00:20:52] Derrick: I want to also ask you because your story is very intricate. You start off exporting or with the global mindset from the beginning. I'd like to ask you maybe what steps you took to get export-ready because that's one of the criteria for us. We have to help anybody because we're a government agency, but at the same time, fully being able to get you the support you need requires you to be export-ready, requires the company to be ready. What did you do to get ready?

[00:21:34] Peter: The first thing that I did was, first of all, have a mindset of traveling, get to see the world, and see what's out there. Like I said at the very beginning, if you have a pull, push versus pull, if you have more of pulling than pushing, your chances of succeeding are higher. A lot of organizations they push. They've got a product, and they're not sure if there's a market out there, but they want to push a market. If you push in a market, that's an uphill task, or when a market is pulling you, that's a downhill task.

The first thing in my mindset is, to be export-ready, what problem can you solve? Is the first step. What problem internationally am I going to solve or what problem exists that I believe I've got a product that can solve that problem? That's the first step. For us, that was the first step in all of that whole process after the eye-opener, after the lightbulb moment with Brendan. That was the first step that we did. Then the next step was, okay, all right, this is what we can do. Then the next step is, how do we go about this? What makes sense? What is that niche? What are we bringing to the table? That was the next step, we had to figure that out. After we figured that out, then the question, the third aspect of it is, what tools are out there that can help us? Do the research, find out what tools are out there that can help, and we did that. We said, okay, we discovered all these other tools that are out there, we discovered DFC, we discovered Power Africa, and we started to communicate with all of these governmental bodies and start to have conversations with them to see how best we can get ourselves export-ready. That was how we finally got to the point of, all right, yes, we are ready to go. Then we said okay, let's start Gold Key Service.

[00:24:06] Derrick: Sounds good. Thank you. What are some of the characteristics you look for in partners or clients overseas or internationally rather?

[00:24:18] Peter: The key things that we look for, number one is the drive. We look for partners who've got drive. That's number one. Number two, we look for partners who are seeking US technology. A lot of people are looking for things, but they're not necessarily looking for US technology. We don't want partners who when we come to them, who will say, "Oh, well, you know what? I think we can get this thing better in China." Those are not the partners we're looking for. We're looking for partners who are interested in US technology and who are interested in the reliability of US technology.

Most important of all, we're looking for partners who are willing to work with us. There's always this stigma that goes around with companies that are new in a business environment, and most people don't want to touch them with a 10-foot pole. We're looking for partners who are willing to take a risk, who are willing to look

beyond the fact that the name on the company is new, but they're willing to look beyond the name of the company and look at the people behind the company. Because at the end of the day, it's not the name that solves the problem, is the people that solve the problem. We look for partners like that.

Because international and financing is always going to be an issue, we look for clients who've got projects that are financially funded, or they've got the necessary tools like bank guarantees and/or what not to back up projects up. Those are the clients we look for. Because the projects we're looking at are small to medium, we're not looking for very big, massive companies as clients.

[00:26:31] Derrick: Great. You spoke earlier about future prospects and some deals in your pipeline. Unless you have some more to add to that, but if not, I also was interested, how much staff do you have that supports export sales?

[00:26:49] Peter: Right now, we've got a staff strength of about six individuals. We've got three in the US and three in Africa that are currently looking at Africa. The US folks are looking at the US itself, North America, and South America. Now that we've got Brazil in, we're also looking at Brazil. We've got about six altogether.

Now, one of the things that we've done to help facilitate the work that we do is that we've partnered with other companies. We've got the engineering EPC company here in Houston that we work with on a lot of our projects. It's given us a broader reach to a lot of the things that we do, and it's really helped us a great deal achieve significantly most of the stuff that we want to do.

[00:27:58] Derrick: Perfect. Good to know. Last question for you then, what advice would you give to companies in the initial stages, or thinking about going international?

[00:28:19] Peter: The first advice I'll give to companies that want to go international first of all is, be open-minded. That's the first thing. Like my own story, what you've come into, what you have in mind may not be what you bring when you come into the room, may not be what you leave with when you leave. Be open-minded, that's number one. Number two, do your research. Figure out tools and figure out things and what you need to help you succeed. The third thing I'll say is travel because if you don't travel, you would not know. Traveling helps one discover what the problems or what you're trying to solve because you can only succeed when you try to solve a problem.

[00:29:22] Derrick: Sounds good. Thank you. Hey, let the people know where they can reach you and the company if they want to get in contact.

[00:29:32] Peter: Yes. Like I said, we're based in Houston, our office is off of I-45. Our URL website, www.ippgbl.com. All of our information are there. All of our contact info it's in our website, phone number, email, and all that's available. We are on Twitter. You can catch us up at Twitter, follow us, get in touch with us, we are @IppGlobal. We're on LinkedIn and all the other social media out there. [00:30:17] Derrick: This podcast is intended to provide information that may be of assistance to US companies. Statements made by Export Nation podcast guests reflect the views and opinions of that individual. This podcast does not constitute an endorsement by the US Commercial Service of the individual, his or her employer, or affiliated entity. The specific information provided, resources mentioned or products or services endorsed are offered by that individual and his or her employer or affiliated entity.

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