



Northwest Door President Meets With Obama

On March 25, Jeff Hohman, Northwest Door president, participated in a roundtable discussion with President Obama at the White House on the topic of smaller companies and exports. In this interview, he tells us about his experience.

Why were you invited to this event?

Hohman: Northwest Door was nominated for the 2013 Tacoma World Trade Center award as the “Emerging Business of the Year.” This was in recognition of our expanding our longtime practice of exporting to Canada to include additional places like Australia, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, and a few other areas.

That recognition got us invited to a few events locally and, eventually, to Washington, D.C. I traveled with a group led by the Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce that included the CEO of the Tacoma World Trade Center to speak to senators and congressmen about export markets and opportunities. We were then invited to attend a small business roundtable discussion in the Roosevelt Room in the West Wing of the White House.

The president seemed to know your story. How did he learn about Northwest Door's business cycle and export activities?

Hohman: The president also included several other smaller companies that all had a common thread. We all exported and had ventured out from just one country. We also shared

the view that there were benefits to exporting and that we could see a bigger future in exporting.

The president asked me three questions: How do we think about exports? What is successful about exports for us? And what are some barriers we face in growing exports?

Out of that, the president liked the part about some of the unique things we do. For example, our first-time export customers get a poster-sized “thank you” photo from us standing in front of their fully loaded container, thanking them for their business. We also show our appreciation in other ways, and we get our fellow employees involved and excited about exports.

The meeting was supposed to include the president's attendance for 30 minutes, tops. An hour and a half later, we finished the discussions and were invited for a photo with President Obama in the Oval Office. What a treat!

In what ways did you interact with the president, and what were your impressions of him during those interactions?

Hohman: We had a relaxed, open, and engaging discussion/dialogue responding to his questions and sharing our experiences. My impression was that he was genuinely interested.

He also shared some compelling statistics, such as, “There are 28 million U.S. small businesses, of which about 300,000 export. Of these that export, only about 40 percent export to more than one country.”



EXPORT ADVICE: Jeff Hohman (left) speaks with President Obama during the roundtable discussion.

President Obama's Comments About Northwest Door

March 25, 2015
Roosevelt Room

Obama: "So I — just to tell one quick story. Jeff Hohman from Northwest Door makes big garage doors. And what he's finding is that when you have that stamp, "Made in America" on it, customers like that. They value it, and there's a ready market out there.

"And because he's been able to sell in places like Saudi Arabia and Australia, he's been able to hire more workers — because his sales, traditionally, had gone down during the wintertime when people aren't thinking about buying a new garage door; they want to keep the one they got closed. (Laughter)

"And so those seasonal business cycles — well, it turns out, when it's winter here, it's summer in Australia, and he's able to keep more folks on the job and, in fact, hire more people because of those sales and those opportunities."

View the video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7PLI8W-nGA&sns=em. The Northwest Door comments begin near the 3:00 mark.

Those were some amazing statistics to me. I can see how the president, or anyone in government for that matter, would be very interested in helping to expand the number of small companies that export. Think what impact that would have on improving the economy.

Did you come away from the experience with any different feelings about the president (than you had before the experience)?

Hohman: The experience of being invited to and attending a discussion with the president of the United States at the White House is an experience that we'll never forget. It happened because Northwest Door, its owners (the DeWitts), and our employees were unafraid to make some changes to pursue some success in exporting. It has made us a stronger and more diverse company.

Did you meet any other notables during this event?

Hohman: Yes. The day before the White House meeting, our group met with our senators and a number of our congressmen to talk about trade, the Trans Pacific Partnership (reducing unfair tariffs), and things like the importance of export-import (Ex-Im) insurance availability, etc.

What were the top two or three most memorable parts of the entire experience at the White House?

Hohman: Seeing the Oval Office, the Resolute desk (the president's desk), and experiencing the incredible emotional swings from "This isn't really happening to us," to "The president is really interested in this!"

It was a very emotional day that I'm sure I'll be telling stories about to my family and our associates for a long time to come. I came away certainly feeling very proud to represent Northwest Door on such a large stage.

What can you tell me about your export activities?

Hohman: We started exporting to Canada almost two decades ago. We began exporting to additional regions regularly in 2011. We started with Australia, then New Zealand, followed closely by Saudi Arabia. We've exported to more than a dozen countries now, but regularly to nine countries.

We continue to have some good success in expanding exports. Our 2014 sales to the Pacific region increased by 74 percent, and our Middle East exports grew by 26 percent. That said, the majority of our exports are to Canada. But we now export to more than eight countries beyond Canada, and we project solid growth in 2015 as well. ■

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