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ext year will be the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' famous "discovery" of America. Poor Columbus has fallen on hard times of late, what with revisionist historians smacking their lips over his more notable failures and reminding us that American natives have a vastly different point of view on this Great American Success Story. But before we relegate the Great Navigator to the scrap heap of trashed-over heros, let's take one last look at some of the positive lessons to be learned from the Columbus experience - ones that could be instructive to our current situation in the American gear industry.

Whatever other complex factors motivated Columbus and his fellow explorers to travel, and the various kings, governments, and bankers of Europe to finance their adventures, one undeniable goal was the opening of new markets. Our European ancestors got into the exploration business to make money. They were looking to open up trade routes to Asia. What they found, of course, was something else entirely, but those trade routes were what they were looking for to begin with.

The decision to finance Columbus' voyage was a business decision too. It was based on the time-honored rule that risk and reward tend to be proportional - the bigger the risk, the bigger the possible reward at the end.

And never doubt the nature of the risks. It wasn't just that no one in Europe was certain of what lay in the Western Atlantic, and that most contemporary maps showed a big, blank space there and the ominous warning, "Here there be dragons." Nor was it just that even a state-of-the-art ship of the day was one most of us would be reluctant to take for an afternoon sail in a mild chop off Oak Street Beach in Chicago.

The Niña, The Pinta, And The American Gear Industry

Some of the risks would sound quite familiar to us today. The "bean counters" in the Spanish court were "bottom line" men too. They were being asked to pay out a lot of money with only a dubious promise of something in return. And they weren't all that familiar with the markets they were trying to break into. Contemporary reports were vague, closer to fairy tales than hard data. All they knew for sure was that vast wealth was to be had by the person willing to overcome the obstacles, but that these were formidable. There were different languages and customs that could get the unwary into trouble-if not eaten-and sophisticated, knowledgeable traders who would strike a hard bargain and were reluctant to let newcomers share their markets. Even if one survived the voyage and the dragons, the competition could be, literally, killing.

The more cautious among them had other good reasons for not straying far from their home markets. It was certainly easier and safer and cheaper to do business with their familiar neighbors. They already had established customers. The older trade routes maybe weren't the best, but they were familiar. The risks were at least known ones.

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And what happened if Columbus was wrong? What if he got eaten by those dragons? What if the earth really did have an edge, and he and his ships sailed over it into nothingness? What if those "Indians" wouldn't sell them their spices, and who knew how to speak Chinese anyway? Sure, there might be all the riches of a vast, wealthy continent if they succeeded, but what if they

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lost their investment?

The decision to enter new markets hasn't changed. It's still a voyage into unknown territory, full of risks and unforeseen problems. The dragons may have changed the color of their scales, but they're still waiting out there, and nobody's investment is guaranteed. But the rewards haven't changed either. For the courageous, patient, and persistent, they can more than cover the risks and expenses.

In the Spanish court, the risk-takers won out, and the rest, as they say, is history. True, the course of success was not smooth. Columbus was lost for much of his voyage to the New World. After he landed, he thought he was someplace else. He never did find the markets he was really looking for. He and his followers made a lot of expensive, tragic mistakes in opening the markets they did find. But they persevered. They learned. And in the end, the success was of epic proportions.

Our situation in the American gear industry is not unlike that of those bean counters in Queen Isabella's court. For every powerful motivation we have for seeking out new markets overseas, there seems to be an equally good reason for sticking close to home. Money is tight. The economy is shaky. The foreign competition is stiff. The economies in some of our most likely markets are complete wrecks, and the paperwork necessary to get into foreign markets could reforest a small, third-world country. Can we afford to spend the money we have on risky ventures that might take years to pay off or might not pay off at all?

Can we afford not to?

What the visionaries in the Spanish court in 1492 knew was that, risky or not, they really had no option. The push to explore was on. Economic and social pressures all over Europe were demanding the widening of vision to include the rest of the world. If the

Spaniards didn't reach for the new markets, one of their neighbors - Portugal, France, England - would.

The situation is the same today. The pressures of history demand that we broaden our horizons again. Like it or not, we live in a global village, and plenty of our neighbors are already aggressively exploring the opening markets of Eastern Europe, Asia, and South America. With our own markets at home shrinking and our industry growing smaller and smaller, can we afford not to develop new markets both at home and overseas?

Much of the American gear industry seems to me to be stuck in a timid, conservative mind-set where we are reluctant to take the risk of marketing ourselves aggressively - either at home

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or abroad. Like some of Queen Isabella's bean counters, we see the world as limited to our own corner and are content to leave it that way. Let someone else run the risk of sailing off the edge.

This timidity will be our undoing. In the tough economic climate we face today, the gear manufacturers who are succeeding are the ones willing to take the risks and face the unknowns. They are willing to explore new markets here at home or in Eastern Europe, Asia, and South America, and never mind the fact that the profit might not be instant, or that they might make some mistakes and have some colossal failures. They're gambling on their ability to find and develop these new markets.

It's a necessary gamble. We either get out our maps, load our ships, and get moving, or be left behind by the people who do.

Michael Goldstein
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