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SUCCESS STORY

Cameroonian Apparel Maker Rides the Wave into U.S. Market

Ken Atlantic has enlarged its factory and added staff to handle large U.S. orders



Photo: USAID West Africa Trade Hub

Caroline Kendem won a U.S. industry award for the HIV/AIDS testing and counseling program at her company Brodwell, since renamed Ken Atlantic.

As Ken Atlantic invested in its expansion, the USAID West Africa Trade Hub acted as facilitator to ensure the success of the negotiations and final transaction.

Caroline Sack Kendem's factory in Cameroon previously churned out swimsuits and lingerie for the local market and for export to France. Now she's preparing to jump into much larger waters – the American market – and has expanded her company, Ken Atlantic, to meet increased demand.

Kendem has been trained and advised by the USAID West Africa Trade Hub/Accra, which sponsored her to appear at several U.S. tradeshows, most recently *Sourcing at MAGIC* in Las Vegas in February 2007. Contacts cultivated at those shows led to an order of 20,000 medical scrubs, with two more orders to come, for an American buyer.

Such volume called for increased capacity: Kendem hired 100 new staff and quadrupled her factory floor to 8,000 square meters. The space houses the necessary new apparel equipment, including a computerized cutting machine. The investment was facilitated by a venture capital firm, now a shareholder, who put up funds for the necessary equipment. WATH/Accra provided technical assistance and acted as facilitator to ensure the success of the transaction and negotiations.

Kendem expects to ship the first container in the first half of 2007. Meanwhile, she has a new contract with a European buyer she met at a South Africa business conference in 2006. He will ship material to Ken Atlantic to produce scrubs for shipment to the U.S., his first foray into the American market. And at February's AGOA workshop in Cameroon, Kendem agreed to collaborate with another Cameroonian garment manufacturer to produce 25,000 t-shirts for one of his buyers.

She's not all business. Kendem was honored in 2005 with a U.S. apparel industry award for her innovative HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment program. It offers confidential testing for her workers, as well free infant formula for babies with HIV-positive mothers. Intertek Testing Services selected Kendem as the winner of their Best Practices prize in the Worker Wellness category. The only other company so honored was fast-food giant McDonald's.