



Could a product inspired by a Southern Illinois garden find customers around the world?

That's when April reached out to the Illinois SBDC International Trade Center (ITC) at SIUE.

"We knew we had a product people loved, but exporting was completely new to us," Robbins said. "We needed someone to help us understand where to start and what opportunities made the most sense for our company."

How the Illinois SBDC International Trade Center at SIUE Is Helping Skitopel Build Its First Export Strategy

Some businesses begin with a business plan.

Skitopel® began in a family garden. Growing up on her family's farm in Bunker Hill, Illinois, April Robbins spent her summers alongside her grandmother tending vegetables, flowers, and herbs. Those early experiences inspired a lifelong appreciation for nature and entrepreneurship.

A proud Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) alumna, Robbins graduated in 1995 with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, specializing in Entrepreneurship. After successfully operating her own bookkeeping and tax business for more than 20 years, she returned to her roots on the family farm.

While growing herbs such as lavender, peppermint, spearmint, lemon balm, sage, and thyme, Robbins noticed something unexpected. Insects stayed away whenever she worked among the plants. In 2019, curious, she began experimenting with blends of natural essential oils until she developed an effective, plant-based insect repellent.

From that discovery, Skitopel® was born.

Today, every bottle is produced on Robbins' Bunker Hill farm using the same natural ingredients that inspired the company's beginning. As demand grew through regional distributors and hardware trade shows, Robbins began asking a new question:



BUILDING AN EXPORT ROADMAP

Rather than encouraging Skitopel to enter international markets immediately, the ITC focused on developing a strategic export plan.

"The first step to exporting isn't selling overseas, it's assessing your capacity and understanding where your product has the greatest opportunity to succeed," said **Schneidine Louis, Director of the Illinois SBDC International Trade Center at SIUE.** "Our goal is to help businesses make informed decisions, reduce risk, and build a strong foundation for long-term international growth."

To support that effort, the ITC partnered with Professor Yuping Zeng, giving SIUE students the opportunity to conduct international market research for a real Illinois company.

The students evaluated potential export markets based on demand, competition, regulations, and market entry requirements, providing Skitopel with valuable insights while gaining hands-on international business experience.

"Professor Zeng's class did an excellent job identifying which countries would be the best fit for us and explaining why," Robbins said. "The research gave us a great starting point for our export journey."

The collaboration did not end with the classroom.

After reviewing the students' findings, the ITC worked directly with Skitopel to interpret the research, identify additional market opportunities, and develop a practical export strategy tailored to the company's goals.



"Schneidine not only reviewed what the class reported but went above and beyond by explaining every recommendation and helping us understand what would be required to begin exporting," Robbins said. "She also identified additional markets that could be a good fit for our products."

CONNECTING ILLINOIS BUSINESS TO GLOBAL RESOURCES

"Beyond market research, the ITC connected us with valuable export resources, including the Illinois Office of Trade and Investment and the U.S. Commercial Service. Those connections have given us access to experts who can help verify potential international customers and distributors in Southeast Asia, navigate export requirements, and provide guidance as we prepare to enter new markets. Having that network behind us has given us much greater confidence in taking our first steps toward exporting," said Robbins.

"Exporting is a team effort," Louis said. "For more than 40 years, the Illinois SBDC International Trade Center at SIUE has helped thousands of Illinois companies explore and expand into international markets. Over the past five years alone, our clients have generated more than \$160 million in international sales. Recognized with the U.S. President's 'E' Award for Export Service, the nation's highest honor for organizations supporting American exporters, we continue that legacy by providing market intelligence, one-on-one export counseling, and connections to trusted state, federal, and international partners. Our mission is to help Illinois businesses reduce risk, identify new opportunities, and compete successfully in the global marketplace."



For Robbins, that support has been invaluable.

"Any time I have a question, Schneidine goes above and beyond to find an answer," Robbins said. "She's helping us move our company forward and giving us the confidence to expand into international markets."

Today, Skitopel continues to strengthen its domestic presence through distributors including Blish-Mize Company (Kansas), Wallace Hardware (Tennessee), and Arett Sales Corporation (New Jersey) while preparing for its first export opportunities.

For the Illinois SBDC International Trade Center, Skitopel represents more than one company's export journey. It demonstrates how collaboration among Illinois businesses, SIUE faculty and students, and statewide export partners can transform an idea born in a family garden into a business with global potential.

"Helping companies like Skitopel expand internationally is why we're here," Louis said. "When we combine university expertise, and personalized export assistance, we're not only preparing businesses for global success, we're strengthening Illinois' economy one company at a time."

Contact Details:

SKITOPEL : ABOUT THE COMPANY

Skitopel is a family-owned Illinois company specializing in natural, plant-based insect repellent products. Founded by April Robbins, the brand was inspired by years of gardening and a lifelong appreciation for herbs passed down through generations of her family. This is a line of natural insect-repellent products designed to help people enjoy the outdoors without relying on harsh chemicals.

Unlike many conventional insect repellents that contain DEET or synthetic chemicals, Skitopel focuses on using herbs and essential oils grown and harvested on the founder's farm. The company produces its products in the United States and emphasizes environmentally conscious manufacturing, family-friendly formulations, and locally crafted production. According to the company, its mission is to provide effective protection against insects while promoting a healthier and more enjoyable outdoor experience.



SKITOPEL : PRODUCT LINES

Skitopel offers several natural insect-repellent products designed for both personal use and outdoor living. The company's product range includes insect repellent sprays, insect repellent candles, tabletop torches, and value bundles for complete outdoor protection.



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