

Naturallia educates businesses on the North

ELAINE DELLA-MATTIA
The Sault Star

It's Christopher Schmidt's first visit to Sault Ste. Marie, but he doesn't expect it to be his last.

Over the past three days, Schmidt has learned more about what Sault Ste. Marie - and other Canadian companies - has to offer to aid in the mining and mineral resources sector and he's been impressed.

Schmidt is one of almost 200 delegates participating in the Naturallia three-day conference in Sault Ste. Marie. The conference wrapped up Wednesday night.

"I am at every mining conference in Canada," Schmidt said.

While Naturallia includes more than just the mining industry, the business-to-business conference has allowed him to tour local industries that he believes will help the industry in his home country Germany.

"The industry tours we did were very important so we could see the shops and factories and learn how flexible the companies are and if

they can match their products to our customers," he said. "For me, I now have a better understanding of Northern Ontario business and the region and I have business contacts here."

Schmidt is the manager of mining and mineral resources from the Canadian German Chamber of Industry and Commerce. It's his job to support German companies in diversifying their resource supply sources and to establish sustainable supply chains between Canada and Germany. His office serves as the primary contact for both German and Canadian companies.

The German industry is dependent on imports of metals and industrial minerals, about 20% of which come from Canada.

His job centres on fostering business relationships between Canada and Germany in the mining sector and this week's conference allows him to make new contacts and learn what the region has to offer.

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■ **NATURALLIA:** Organizers hope event pushes businesses to expand outward

Naturallia produced lot of energy

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The organizers of a business-to-business matchmaking conference in Sault Ste. Marie hope that the conference will give some local companies the push they need to expand to new markets.

Naturallia focuses on four key areas that have a regional economic significance, including the manufacturers of specialized product, value-added forest products, mining supply and services and smart energy development, supply and services.

The conference included one-on-one business meetings with like-minded businesses, often called "speed dating" for business.

Tom Dodds, a co-chair of

the Naturallia conference and CEO of the Sault Ste. Marie Economic Development Corp., said Northern Ontario is not as strong an exporter of product like other parts of Canada. The international flavor of this event "gets people intrigued and excited about relationships that businesses can develop outside their normal borders," he said. "We created the conditions and they've done the first face-to-face meeting and now they have to nurture and grow that relationship and go about their business."

The conference wrapped up Wednesday night with closing events - a talegate style party - taking place at Sault College's Galley.

"You could see and feel a mix of people from different parts of the

world. There was a lot of energy and buzz at all the events," Dodds said.

Dodds said he was pleased with the number of countries that attended the three-day event from outside Canada.

"The reaction we received is that they found our location a real eye-opener," he said. "Sault Ste. Marie was much different than they had perceived and they had a neat experience."

Dodds said the site tours to the various local industries was instrumental in showcasing the city and its businesses.

In addition to businesses doing their own follow up with the new contacts they made, the EDC will also be doing its homework and follow up with its new contact base

and companies and determine what connection they could have on the local economy.

The conference wasn't one where participants expected to complete contracts on the spot, but instead use the meetings and discussions they had to make new business contacts and explore possible future business endeavors.

Sometimes that can take a year or more to occur, said the Innovation Centre's Jason Naccarato, a co-chair of the conference.

"I think there were cognizant and meaningful meetings for our people and even during the free time, the meeting rooms were left open and there were people in there continuing to meet with other people and other businesses," he said.

■ **NATURALLIA:** Outsiders give thumbs up

Sault not just 'another small city'

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Schmidt has been to other Northern Ontario communities, including Sudbury and Timmins but also was fascinated with the interest in biotechnology in Sault Ste. Marie and creating a relationship between Sault College and the research sector in Germany.

"We support green mining and mining and renewable energy are very important to us," he said.

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For Soo Foundry president

Robert Cohen, the one-on-one business meetings are a unique opportunity that is different from a traditional trade show.

While Cohen said it's difficult to measure the success of the conference and his participation, he said those results will likely be more known a year down the line.

"We could see possible bids in the future and we've met people who wanted to know about us and we didn't expect would," he said. "That was very surprising to us."

In addition, Cohen said he was able to renew or reinforce existing business relationships through the conference at a relatively low cost considering it takes place in Sault Ste. Marie.

Matti Kymenvaara, a bioenergy expert of Sole Proprietorship, a Finland-based industry, became interested in the conference after he learned more about Northern

Ontario and the similarities of the climate and forestry nature to Finland.

"I first met a Canadian delegation in Sweden and kept the contact and learned of this," he said.

Kymenvaara said he's looking at the possibilities of getting into the Canadian market and thought the conference would help him make initial connections with industry players.

"It definitely looks like something could come of this," he said between business meetings. "I'm getting some good leads and contacts and we'll see where we can begin negotiations."

Jessica Mooney, owner of Fuzednotions Creative Studio Inc., specializes in marketing and communications and helps businesses with their communication challenges.

To the Sault Ste. Marie entrepreneur, the conference opens up new business opportunities for

foreign companies who may need assistance or advice in getting their message out in the North American market.

"Sometimes its just about making connections while at other times you can come up with on the spot solutions because you're having a 30-minute conversation with another business and a decision-maker," Mooney said.

Mooney was disappointed that two business meetings with companies from Africa didn't pan out because of a last minute cancellation and she wished those time slots could have been replaced.

Cohen expected more primary companies, larger manufacturers and resource companies to attend the event but understands that Sault Ste. Marie's location may be a factor in that decision making.

"When people come to Sault Ste. Marie they actually see the opportunities and they see that Sault Ste. Marie just isn't another small city," Mooney said.