Storytelling, Speed, and Stamina: A Diplomat's Playbook for Finnish Companies in the U.S.

Insights from Ambassador Sareva, Consul General of Finland, New York

A Member Spotlight — Finnish American Chamber of Commerce, New York • July 2026

Why This Interview Matters

FACC-NY sat down with Ambassador Sareva, Consul General of Finland in New York, for a wide-ranging conversation spanning a four-decade career across the UN, the Finnish Foreign Ministry, and, most recently, Finland's New York Consulate General, where he has served for the past four years. His message to FACC-NY members is confident: Finnish companies already have what it takes to win in the U.S., since the science and the product are rarely the problem. What separates the ones who break through is how they sell both: leading with confidence and story instead of modesty and facts, pricing for value instead of cost, and staying patient through a slow, expensive market entry long enough to let it pay off. All of it, in his view, is within reach, and this spotlight distills how.

The Conversation

Who is Ambassador Sareva, and how did his path lead to Consul General in New York?

Ambassador Sareva joined Finland's Foreign Ministry at the young age of 24 and has spent virtually his entire career there, with roughly 14 years on secondment to the United Nations along the way. His first posting was Moscow, in the final years of the Soviet Union: "like going to a different world," he recalls. A year of postgraduate training in Geneva followed, where his younger daughter was born, then a posting in Washington, D.C. focused on trade policy, and a few years at the OSCE, Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe, mission in Vienna. He took a year of unpaid leave to join his wife, who had landed a UN legal post with UNIFIL in southern Lebanon, living with their children in northern Israel.

Back in Helsinki, he was appointed director for disarmament and arms control at the ministry (a senior post for someone so young) before being sent back to Moscow a year later as deputy chief of mission. In 1998, with his wife posted to UN Headquarters, he transferred to Finland's UN mission in New York, launching a long run in multilateral diplomacy: representing Finland on the UN's budget committee during Finland's first EU presidency, then a year as chief of staff to Harri Holkeri, Finland's former prime minister, during Holkeri's term as President of the UN General Assembly.

From there, a Swedish-language interview with Hans Blix led to a stint as Blix's special assistant while Blix led the UN's weapons inspections in Iraq. Ambassador Sareva then returned to Finland's UN mission as Deputy Permanent Ambassador (2002–2006), moved to the UN Secretariat as Chief of the Disarmament and Peace Branch for three years, and went back to Geneva in 2009 for roughly nine years: first directing the UN's disarmament office there, later the UN Institute for Disarmament

Research. He returned to Helsinki as Finland's first Ambassador for Innovation for three years, then Ambassador for Cyber Affairs for one, before his appointment as Consul General in New York in 2022.

Why did Finland fold its trade-promotion arm into the Foreign Ministry?

Because geopolitics and business have become inseparable, Ambassador Sareva says, and not just for Finnish companies, but for everyone. Supply chain resilience, energy security, and industrial policy now shape business decisions in a way they didn't a decade ago. That's the direct reason Finland integrated Business Finland's foreign staff into its embassies and consulates: to give companies a single counter for geopolitical advice, trade-policy guidance, and export promotion, instead of three separate doors. (He's careful to note that Washington's shifting trade-policy landscape isn't his day-to-day focus from New York, so he doesn't claim particular authority on that front.)

What else has changed in the last few years?

Buyers, he says, increasingly want partners built for the long haul rather than the lowest bidder, and Finland's reputation for trustworthiness is a real, if under-marketed, asset there.

> *“We are trustworthy, and we will be there for our partners no matter what. That's something we have to keep repeating, consistently and on message.”*

He also notes that some federal incentives for clean-technology buyers, the Inflation Reduction Act among them, have been scaled back under the current administration. But he sees that as creating opportunity rather than closing it: state- and city-level incentive programs remain very much alive in exactly the sectors where Finland already has strength, including clean tech, batteries, and critical minerals. Separately, he observes that personal relationships have become an even more central currency in Washington policymaking of late, reinforcing a broader point he returns to throughout the conversation: this is a relationship-based economy.

Is AI leveling the playing field, or tilting it further?

Ambassador Sareva is unequivocal that AI has made competition tougher across the board: companies now need to show not just technical excellence, but how AI actively strengthens what they sell. Asked whether large companies that have already “internalized” AI are pulling further ahead of small and mid-sized ones, or whether smaller companies' agility gives them the edge, he called it “a very good question” without a settled answer: startups may be better positioned to build AI in from day one, he said, but it would be worth comparing how much of an edge large tech firms have actually built versus industrial and retail sectors, and whether big companies, in the U.S. or in Finland, have truly outpaced SMEs on this front. An open question, in his telling, worth watching rather than one he considers closed.

What Finnish habits help, and which one works against them?

High trust and integrity run through Finnish society and carry directly into how Finnish businesspeople operate: reliable, consistent, and true to their word. Add low hierarchies (even senior people are easy to reach), a collaborative style, and genuine engineering excellence, and Finland arrives with real advantages.

The trouble, in his account, is that a few of those same instincts translate poorly. Because “what we promise is what you get” is simply assumed at home, Finnish companies often default to under-promising and over-delivering, a habit that reads in the U.S. not as humility but as a lack of confidence.

> *“We should be much bolder, much braggier if you will, about the fact that we really do deliver.”*

Modesty about strong technical work has the same effect: it undersells what's often the company's best asset.

What adjustments does he recommend?

Storytelling. Finnish companies, he says, consistently underestimate how much storytelling matters, especially here.

> *“If it's a great story, it's seared in your memory, unlike facts and figures. Facts and figures are important, but a good story is what stays with people.”*

Vision over perfection. Americans “buy vision as much as they buy technology,” in a country he describes as run on visions. Companies that chase perfection before launching often find the market has moved on by the time they're ready.

Confidence under uncertainty. No decision ever comes with complete information, in his view; waiting for it is its own risk.

> *“By the time you have something in front of you that you think is perfect, the train has probably already left the station.”*

Clock speed. The pace of business here, he says, is simply faster than in Finland or the rest of Europe.

> *“This is a frenetic country. If you don't sync your clock speed to the American clock speed, you're going to be biting the dust.”*

Pricing on value, not just cost. Finnish companies tend to price primarily on cost, he says, leaving the value half of the equation on the table.

Where can Finland claim a genuine edge in the U.S. market?

Several sectors stand out to him. The Helsinki region now ranks as the world's second-best quantum-technology ecosystem, behind only Cambridge, UK, and ahead of San Francisco. Clean energy, circular-economy technology, and critical minerals (including the battery value chain, where companies like Metso have plenty to offer) are all active areas of focus for the consulate. Advanced telecommunications remain a strength too, underscored by Nokia's newly announced AI-telecommunications partnership with NVIDIA. Life sciences and MedTech are gaining ground as well. Ambassador Sareva has led three life science business delegations during his term: to Texas, to Minnesota (including a stop at the Mayo Clinic, which he says is very interested in Finnish life-science solutions), and, most recently, to Boston and New York. Along the way, he's watched Finnish companies visibly improve their pitches, getting to the value proposition faster in the critical first twenty seconds of a meeting.

He's just as adamant that Finland shouldn't overlook consumer products and the creative industries (design, architecture, gaming, music) just because they're less visible in the U.S. today. Nothing makes a Finnish product inherently less premium than a Swedish, Danish, or Italian one, in his view. He points to Sinituote, the Finnish cleaning-equipment maker, as a company that could just as easily brand itself as high-end and design-forward rather than purely functional, and cites Italy, where roughly half of exports are consumer goods and a meaningful share of that is luxury, as the model to study: millions of U.S. households make spending decisions on feeling and story, not price.

> *"In some cases, Finnish companies could add a zero to the end of their pricing."*

There's a Finnish expression for missing a moment like this: "kävellä onnensa ohi," or "to walk past your own luck." He'd like Finland's creative sectors to stop doing exactly that, both on their own merits and because they strengthen the broader national brand every other Finnish exporter trades on.

What does the data say about Finnish companies' appetite for risk?

He points to a widely discussed McKinsey report from the past year comparing Finnish companies with their Nordic peers. The finding: large, listed Finnish corporations spend markedly less on R&D than peers, while maintaining strong balance sheets and paying out high dividends. Reasonable people can argue that's simply management doing its job for shareholders, he says, but it's worth confronting given the pattern and given that the same research put Finland roughly six percentage points behind peer countries on growth. His diagnosis: optimization is deeply embedded in how the Finnish economy operates, but optimization alone isn't enough. What's missing is a sharper focus on growth, at the company level and the national level alike.

What does "being bolder" look like in practice?

Concretely: investing before a return is guaranteed, since Finnish companies tend to be risk-averse by comparison. Going for the best available talent in the U.S. rather than economizing, especially in marketing and sales. Showing up: engaging visibly in industry networks and public discussions, rather than staying in the background. And making decisions with confidence instead of waiting for information that will never be complete, because in the U.S., reticence reads as a company that doesn't believe in its own product.

> *"You have to tell people why your products are exceptional, because if you don't, somebody else will."*

What are the biggest mistakes he sees Finnish companies make?

He resists naming just one, but a cluster of patterns recurs. There's a Finnish word for the trait he thinks matters most: “turnauskestävyys,” roughly “tournament endurance,” the capacity to keep performing under sustained competitive pressure rather than folding early. He sees too many Finnish companies come up short on exactly that, withdrawing from the U.S. before a slow, expensive market entry has had time to pay off.

Beyond that: treating the U.S. as a single market rather than dozens of regional, culturally distinct, income-distinct ones. Hiring talent that “prices itself as inexpensive,” which usually costs more in the end than simply hiring the best. And underestimating how relationship-driven the American market really is.

> *“Finland is a club. The U.S. is not a club; it's built on personal relationships that, over time, create something a club can't offer.”*

You have to make yourself interesting to a prospective partner and, generally, likable, though a strong enough value proposition can compensate for the latter. Either way, he says, it takes time to build relationships that actually produce results.

What's his advice for FACC and Finland's broader network going forward?

He's complimentary of FACC-NY's recent momentum and wants to see it sustained. With Team Finland's integration now giving the Ministry for Foreign Affairs a genuine one-stop shop, he sees FACC as an essential, first-tier partner, alongside organizations like the Finlandia Foundation National and the Finnish Cultural Institute in New York, precisely because FACC can do something the consulate can't: it's owned by its members. His hope is for FACC to become the premier platform where Finnish companies learn from each other in a genuinely collaborative spirit, something he says requires passion as much as strategy.

That's also where his closing note lands. He chafes a little at Finland's reputation for being cool, calm, and composed: fitting, in his view, for geopolitics and relations with Finland's eastern neighbor, but the wrong posture for business.

> *“When it comes to business and pursuing success, don't be cool and calm and composed. Americans don't know what to make of that.”*

His parting example: the European and Israeli companies that have succeeded in the U.S. typically arrived with a vision and a concept, then improved it continuously based on what the market told them, rather than trying to perfect it before ever walking in the door.

Ten Takeaways for Finnish Companies Entering the U.S. Market

Distilled from the interview, a practical checklist for members planning or considering U.S. market entry.

1. **Use the one-stop shop.** Business Finland's integration into the Foreign Ministry means geopolitical, trade, and export advice now come from a single counter.
2. **Sell the vision before the product is perfect.** Refine it in the market, not before you enter it; waiting for perfect often means arriving too late.
3. **Swap under-promising for confident delivery.** Finnish reliability is real; say so, plainly and often, instead of assuming results will speak for themselves.
4. **Match the U.S. clock speed.** Decisions move faster here than in Finland or Europe; staff and plan for that pace.
5. **Price for value, not just cost.** U.S. buyers, especially at the premium end, pay for story and brand as much as specification.
6. **Know where Finland already leads.** Quantum (Helsinki ranks #2 globally), clean energy, critical minerals, AI-enabled telecom, and life sciences all have real momentum in the U.S. right now.
7. **Don't walk past the creative and consumer opportunity.** Design, architecture, gaming, and music build the brand every other Finnish exporter relies on.
8. **Invest ahead of the return.** Finnish firms lag Nordic peers on R&D spend, a gap one recent study ties to roughly six points of growth.
9. **Pay for the best local talent the first time.** Underpricing expertise, especially in marketing and sales, tends to cost more later.
10. **Treat the U.S. as many markets, not one.** Regional, cultural, and income differences mean a strategy that works in one city may not transfer to the next.

Prepared by the Finnish American Chamber of Commerce – New York, based on an interview conducted with Jarmo Sareva, Consul General of Finland in New York. Quotes lightly edited for length and clarity.

Ambassador Jarmo Sareva, Consul General of Finland in New York. Photo: Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland / Finland Abroad.