



International Marketing is a Two-Way Street

by Michael Woody,
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Recently, I heard the president of a large U.S.-based supplier dismiss the Canadian market out of frustration over his firm's inability to master the nuances of Canadian distribution. As someone who has aggressively marketed promotional products to Canada since 1984—and profited from it—I was surprised by the offhand nature of the remark. But I fell into a similar trap myself not long ago, and realized how easy it is to forget that international marketing is a two-way street. If putting yourself in the shoes of a domestic customer is difficult, trying to understand the perspective of a non-U.S. customer can sometimes be so overwhelming, even after years of experience, that you lose sight of the benefits.

During my 12 years of selling promotional products into the Canadian market, we have changed our distribution strategy twice. The first time was in 1987, when we established a central distribution warehouse in the Toronto area. We were able to consolidate our shipments into Canada and service our distributors more quickly on repeat orders. This arrangement worked extremely well for several years, and led to significant growth. However, late last year, prodded by NAFTA and our expansion into other markets outside the U.S., we realized that we could better service our Canadian distributors by asking them

to deal directly with our U.S. factory.

This meant, of course, that we would now be shipping a much larger number of smaller orders across the border. Not having dealt with Canadian customs in this manner for a number of years, we were initially discouraged by the frequency and severity of the bumps we encountered on this new road to Canada. But with extra effort on our part, and the patience of our friends in Canada, we have overcome most of the difficulties.

I was reminded of my own lack of international customer empathy when our Canadian forwarding agent came to Quill for a meeting. I complained for several minutes to him that, in spite of the huge volume of trade between the U.S. and Canada, in spite of NAFTA, and in spite of Canada's proximity to us, shipping into Canada is sometimes fraught with more difficulties and uncertainties than shipping to, for example, Germany or Australia. After listening politely, he responded, "If you think it's hard to ship from the U.S. to Canada, you should see the mine-

field that U.S. customs sets up when I try to ship Canadian products to the States!" I had to admit, that thought never occurred to me.

And it led me to consider the minefields Canadian customers endure to do business with a U.S. supplier—gambling on exchange rates that could mean the difference between profit or loss on an order,

concerns that a shipment could be held at the border and not make that special event date, higher shipping costs and a multitude of other potential problems.

The ability to see things through the international customer's eyes is a difficult skill to acquire and maintain, but a vital one when marketing outside the U.S. My Canadian forwarding agent gave me a refresher course, and

helped me remember that Canadian distributors pay dearly for their willingness to buy from U.S. suppliers. If we want the business, and the potential growth and profits that accompany it, the least we can do is give them their money's worth. **PPB**

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