

If you are a small- or medium-sized enterprise, it may be much more effective to outsource your e-business needs to a hosting company. These Application Service Providers (ASPs) are professionally equipped to set up hardware, software and security systems that can provide many online tools, including those for:

- customer transactions;
- trade negotiations;
- foreign exchange services;
- credit protection; and
- financial operations such as accounts receivable.

Finding e-leads

Your potential e-customers may be out there, but how do you connect to them? There are several mechanisms for tracking down business leads and opportunities. The major ones are:

- **Trade lead services** – these services match buyers to sellers. One example is the International Business Opportunities Centre's e-Leads® service at www.e-leads.ca. When you subscribe, the system matches export leads with your export interests and sends you a notification by email.
- **International marketplaces** – these are Internet-based electronic marketplaces where buyers and sellers can find each other. Many are industry-focused and have the backing of major companies in the industry. They offer you a variety of tools, such as posting requests for quotations or displaying online catalogues. You'll find one example at www.sourcecan.gc.ca.
- **Search engines** – be sure your Web site is listed with major international search engines such as Google and Yahoo. Your hosting service or Web developer will do this for you.
- **B2B exchanges** – most of these exchanges specialize in sectors like metals, apparel and forest products. They are a source of e-trade leads and may give you a more secure e-business environment than the online international marketplaces can provide.

Checking e-leads

The precautions you use in traditional exporting, in verifying the trustworthiness and stability of a potential export customer, for example, also apply to the world of e-business. Some guidelines are:

- Be sure you know who you're dealing with. Always verify addresses and avoid doing business in countries that are known for fraud. If you can't identify a potential customer or the country of origin of an order, don't proceed with the deal.
- Other characteristics of the potential customer's country are also important. How good is its communications infrastructure? How stable are its financial systems? What level of political risk does it represent? As in all export operations, due diligence is an essential precondition of success.
- Market research is a key component of evaluating e-leads. The principles of market research are the same for e-business exporting as they are for traditional exporting.
- Credit assessments are as important in e-business as anywhere else. Credit card fraud is on the rise, especially in certain parts of the world, so be doubly careful when dealing with credit card purchases from these regions.