

INTRODUCTION

In its attempt to better support the internationalization efforts of Canadian companies, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) has made considerable changes in recent years. New programs have been put in place and existing ones revised. The organization has also been restructured, all of these moves reflecting an adjustment to new developments and different circumstances.

The operating environment within which DFAIT functions has seen dramatic developments over the last decade, with economic and political liberalization, industry restructuring, and regional trading blocs, simultaneously providing opportunities and throwing up threats to Canadian business. Closer to home, DFAIT has had to make accommodations to new circumstances. Two deserve particular mention. The deep economic recession has put severe pressure on government finances. This situation, coupled with a growing sentiment that government is "too big," has led the Canadian government to reduce budgets, particularly through a reduction in trade commissioners (TCs) serving overseas. This is ironic, since resources have disappeared during a period of greater company interest in internationalization and fiercer competition.

The Canadian Trade Commissioner Service (TCS) is examined in this context. After 100 years of distinguished service to business, the TCS faces a number of important challenges. Users of the service express concerns about its effectiveness. Many of these concerns are echoed by TCs themselves. Canada needs an effective TCS if it is to remain a competitive international force, and so this matter merits serious attention.

The paper begins with a short discussion of the promotion of international business by government in Canada and recent changes at DFAIT. The focus then turns to the difficulties that TCs are currently experiencing as they attempt to deliver high quality services to Canadian business. A distinctive feature of the paper is that it reflects the views of practising TCs, a voice that has been seldom heard in this debate.