

Trade Commissioner Service 100 Years Young

One hundred years ago when John Short Larke was appointed in 1894 to the Australian colonies as Canada's first trade commissioner, the Minister's recommendation to the Privy Council listed some of the duties he would be expected to perform:

1. Collect and send to the department information both on the general trading requirements in Australia and on specific trade opportunities.
2. Report the names and addresses of firms dealing in products made in Canada.
3. Pass on to dealers in Australia the names of Canadian firms anxious to sell products in which they might be interested.
4. Report to the Minister each month on the demand for goods that Canada could supply and on related trade matters.
5. Answer correspondence received both from Australian firms and from Canadian suppliers dealing with commercial matters.
6. Promote trade between Canada and Australia in every possible way while acting under instructions from the Minister of Trade and Commerce.

These duties, wouldn't you agree, are still relevant today, though we now refer to them as being part of a more sophisticated "intelligence gathering".

John Short Larke set off in early December 1894 for Australia. His appointment had been warmly recommended to the Prime Minister by Sir Mackenzie Bowell, then Canada's Minister of Trade and Commerce: *"In order to make our venture in establishing the Australian line a success, it is absolutely necessary to have a resident agent at Sydney...I know of no man in Canada so well fitted for this position as Larke... He is an enthusiast on the extension of Canadian trade... has a happy aptitude for public speaking and could do much good in addressing Boards of Trade and other bodies."*

Here again, I can safely confirm that enthusiasm and "a happy aptitude for public speaking (or writing)" remain essential attributes to the effective trade commissioner.

On reading excerpts of dispatches sent by Larke to his superiors in Ottawa, and diligently unearthed by O. Mary Hill in her book *Canada's Salesmen to the World*, I was struck, once again, by the timeliness of Larke's advice to would-be exporters and his insistence on long-term commitment.

"The slowness with which new business can be done must be impressed upon travellers coming here. Some come over, expect to travel four or five thousand miles, do a large trade and get back by next steamer. When this cannot be done they fret and fume and grumble at things that do not happen to be like those in Canada. They must remember they and their goods are new and unknown to this country. Some of them have not even samples of the goods they offer. There is a market for many lines of Canadian goods but...it requires time, some money and patience and without this equipment I would not advise any man to come." (Larke-1896).

Doesn't it sound quite similar to what is often read in *CanadExport* pages, i.e. the need for an exporter to establish a permanent presence in the market he/she wishes to conquer?

N.B. Apparently, (and here again the comparison with to-day's reports remains valid), not all reports presented the same interest to Headquarters. There is this instance when the Deputy Minister transmitted parts of Larke's report to his Minister in the following manner: *"...as a portion of it may be of interest to you...I enclose it herewith. The balance of his report is not such as you would care to spend time in reading"*. Don't worry, old chap, it happens to all of us!

One hundred years later, the international business environment has changed, rules have become more complex and the competition more fierce. But the challenge remains: to promote Canadian goods and services internationally.

In a subsequent issue, we will examine how these evolving rules are reshaping the role of the trade commissioner.

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