

THE ELECTRONIC TRADE COMMISSIONER

By Bill Skinner

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In 1894 John Larke, Canada's first Trade Commissioner, sailed to Australia with orders to report on trade prospects for Canadian manufacturers there. Larke was in the information business, and he reported by mail.

In 100 years the rationale of the Trade Commissioner's job has not changed: we are still in the information business. However, the tools and techniques of the job have changed from reporting by steamer-mail to using telexes, telephones, facsimiles and e-mail. Now the TCS has another tool: an Electronic Bulletin Board Service (BBS).

TPP, as part of the MI/I initiative, is constructing an experimental BBS employing existing hardware and off-the-shelf software. The BBS complements the InfoCentre's FaxLink and SIGNET's forthcoming broadcast fax capability. The BBS is also consistent with renewing government using information technology. Information dissemination is an effective method for governments to add value to marketplace decision making.

The BBS is a logical next step as another means of communicating information. A recent Maclean's magazine article on the new economy claimed more than half a million Canadian homes now contain PCs with modems. The percentage in SMEs is even higher. There are approximately 30 BBS systems across the federal government. By establishing a DFAIT BBS, the Canadian Trade Commissioner Service joins the ranks of all other G-7 trade services which offer a BBS to their exporters.

The immediate goal of TPP's BBS is to make the InfoCentre's trade documents accessible electronically on a 7-day-a-week 24-hour basis. At first, this will be on a stand-alone dial up basis only. But, in the longer term, the BBS should be accessi-

ble to Canadian companies via Datapac (or a 1-900 number) and ultimately as a "gopher" site on the Internet.

The BBS will also feature moderated conferences ("news groups" to Internet users) for discussion of common problems and questions.

Another more modest goal of the BBS is to provide the InfoCentre with an internet e-mail address. This will allow the BBS to e-mail newsletters, press releases, announcements of new publications, forthcoming missions, etc, to users who subscribe to the list server, tentatively called CANADEXPORT & TRADE NEWS. In the long term, the BBS will also allow for fax delivery of documents.

The challenge will be for our clients to change from conventional mail, voice mail and fax mail to getting information electronically from DFAIT's Bulletin Board Service. The economics of this service are superior to any other current method.

In several recent DFAIT surveys, exporters have responded that the #1 service they expect from the TCS is timely market information on sales leads and contacts. Indeed, a recent market study by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce cited dissemination of information about trade contacts as the #1 obstacle to exporter growth. Exporters want targeted information quickly. Exporters need to have a road map to sources of trade leads, contacts and customer and competitor information. The BBS is one starting point.

Is the BBS a field of dreams? If we build it, will they come? The evidence is clear from our market research that information providers such as Trade Commissioners, librarians and information brokers, will use the BBS if there is useful information on it. However, usage will depend upon how we package the services and how useful the information is. Like a good garden, it must be tended to or it will go dormant. As John Larke discovered 100 years ago, in the information business dormancy is bad news

