

# SHARING TRADE SECRETS

## Embassies Help Put Vancouver Tour Operator on Right Track

*When it comes to exporting Canadian products and services, there's one key sector that does not always come to mind — tourism. Yet there are numerous tour operators who successfully attract foreign buyers — tourists — to Canada. The Rocky Mountaineer Railtours of North Vancouver offers one such success story.*

Not that success has come easily for the young Rocky Mountaineer.

But it has managed to build an enviable track record — in a large measure thanks to the help of Canadian tourism officers working in Canadian Embassies and Consulates throughout the world.

### A rocky start

It all started five years ago.

Although VIA-Rail had introduced all-day tours of the Rocky Mountains back in 1988, the money-losing service ended up on the chopping block two years later in the face of government cutbacks.

That's when a group of dedicated people — with over 120 years of collective experience at B.C. Rail, CN and CP — put in a bid to take over the dayliner.

Following its successful bid, the group, led by current Rocky Mountaineer President and CEO Peter Armstrong, had two weeks to get things moving.

Luckily, the rolling stock was part of the deal — all the former transcontinental coaches built in the early '50s but refurbished since.

### Overcoming hurdles

The young company was immediately faced with a lot of challenges.

"One of our major hurdles," relates Eric Belanger, the company's Director of Media and Public Relations, was that the travel world at large had been left with the impression that rail travel in Canada had come to an end."

And with inaccurate stories such as "The last Train to Medicine Hat" aired by PBS, the tone was set and caused tremendous uncertainty in the marketplace.

"Our new company certainly did not have a presence in these markets to directly combat the misinformation, nor the financial resources to mount and sus-

tain the massive media campaign that would have been required to correct the situation," admits Belanger.

### Embassies to the rescue

That's when Armstrong went to Tourism Canada and together, they devised a marketing plan with key contacts.

"We turned to Canada's representatives in our Consulates and Embassies abroad and were rewarded with immediate and impressive results," says Belanger.

"These dedicated public servants came to the assistance of the Rocky Mountaineer and Canada's tourism industry, during a time of real need."

With a majority of Rocky Mountaineer customers coming from other countries — 50 per cent from the U.S. alone — little wonder that marketing abroad is crucial for the young company.

According to Belanger, "The Tourism Officers immediately provided expert knowledge of key markets in the U.S., Europe and Asia. This vital marketing advice came complete with sales contacts.

"The often unsolicited role they played at consumer and trade shows, in media relations and in travel agent relations, directly contributed to re-establishing Canada's place in the railtour business," Belanger believes.

Thanks to all this help, the  
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CANADEXPORT

ISSN 0823-3330

Editor-in-Chief: Amir Guindi  
Editor: Don Wight  
Layout: Yen Le  
Publishing: BOÎTE NOIRE

Telephone: (613) 996-2225  
Fax: (613) 992-5791  
Circulation: 40,000

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monthly, in both English and French, by the Department of Trade (DFAIT), Trade Communications Division (BCT).

Canada to interested exporters and business-oriented people. ss card. For address changes and cancellations, please send four to six weeks.

Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, a KIA 0G2.



and International Trade (DFAIT)

December 4, 1995