

How Abidjan adapted to change

Last April, the Trade Commissioner Service announced it was refocussing its services abroad. Up to this point, the Abidjan post had concentrated solely on providing what we now call additional services. Thus, we were faced with three immediate challenges: how to deliver core and additional services; how to inform our clients of the changes; and how to alter the role of our trade officers.

Abidjan is a small mission with a minimal trade budget, but one that has seen major increases in business over the past four years. Without the necessary human and financial resources to devote to a complete overhaul of our services, how did we deal with the situation?

First, we recruited a Canadian intern to develop and implement a trade team action plan. Next, we set priorities regarding additional services, and began preparing market information. Lastly, we established a running dialogue with all our partners while notifying our clients of the anticipated changes. This dialogue allowed us to make the right choices and ensure a relatively seamless and inexpensive transition.

When the new standards for additional services took effect October 1, 1999, we had two options: deliver the services ourselves and have clients reimburse us directly, or identify outside service providers. Since we were able to find competent local service providers, we chose the latter, and used the following criteria to select and certify them:

1. Reference Check

- Does the agency have North American or European clients?
- Do clients return (repeat business)?

2. Verification of capabilities and service standards:

- Does the agency respond to our request within a maximum of five days?

- Do they have knowledge of the bureaucracy, high-level contacts, tourism experience?
- What means of communication and office equipment do they use?
- How many experienced staff do they have?

3. Establish a working relationship with suppliers

- Does the agency express interest concerning our approach?
- Do they communicate and present well?

We assessed each service provider by gaging our clients' satisfaction with the services they received. In addition, we held a training session for our service providers, which allowed us to clarify each party's role, to set our service standards and to finalize the supply and cost of services.

For core services, we developed a trade manual and sectoral studies for our clients' information. We also adopted the best practices of the Horizons Web site and adapted them to Abidjan's needs.

Re-engineering the Trade Section is a challenge that will require our post to switch from its prevailing oral culture to a structured, client-based approach. It is an endeavour that involves a major shift in orientation, and it is where Abidjan will focus most of its energies this year.