

Chapter 4

The Interview

Setting the Interview Dates

When you are ready to set up appointments with the agents on your short list of good prospects, plan to visit them in their territory. If any of the agents choose your plant for the interview location, allow yourself enough time to visit the territory you are targeting before the interview takes place. Such a visit provides an opportunity to meet potential customers. This can be helpful, especially if you have not been selling directly to any buyers south of the border. Advise the agents well in advance of your visit, and, together, arrange to call on a few potential purchasers.

How the Canadian Consulate Can Help

The Commercial Division at each of the Canadian consulates in the United States has years of hands-on experience liaising between agents and manufacturers. You should have contacted the consulate long before you decided to make this trip to the United States as final preparation for the interviews with agents.

If the consulate has a file record of your company's marketing plans for its region of the United States, (see Chapter 2), you can be sure that, when you call for an appointment, the commercial officers will be ready with information about a few potential buyers you can visit.

The commercial officers in the consulates often can assist you with final details for interviews with agents, particularly if the agents' home territory is close to the consulate. Often there is an office in the consulate that you can use for the interviews, or a larger area to display product samples and literature.

The consulate's commercial officers can introduce you to regional associations of agents or other manufacturers in your industry sector. These organizations can provide updated information on doing business in their region. Depending on your type of business, the consulate's officers might suggest you join a regional association of manufacturers which

organizes annual or semi-annual trade shows and invites the buyers in the region. This may be helpful to the Canadian manufacturer, who is trying to learn local trade practices as quickly as possible.

Your First Marketing Visit

How does your competition approach the market in the region you have targeted? A few days spent surveying the business environment in the selected U.S. region will pay dividends when you sit down to interview agents.

If it is appropriate for your industry sector, visit some retailers to have a close look at the competition's product lines, pricing, and the space each line commands on the display racks in retail stores. If your industrial product is going to be sold mainly to U.S. manufacturers, visit some plants in the territory to learn how these potential customers approach purchasing decisions for products such as yours.

From your viewpoint as the Canadian supplier, the U.S. competition in your product line can seem impressive. An experienced commercial counsellor at a Canadian consulate in the U.S. suggests that "there is something else to keep in mind, regarding your meetings with both agents and potential customers: their experiences with Canadian suppliers in the past can work either in your favour or to your detriment." Canadians are often perceived as push-overs by U.S. agents who are used to more aggressive U.S. manufacturers. You might also have to contend with suspicion and extreme caution from a good agent who has terminated an agreement with a previous Canadian exporter who did not deliver on time or did not supply the specified quality of product which was promised.

Beware of the oversell. On your part, when you are starting to sell in a new territory, it can be tempting to overstate what your company can do. On the other side, some agents who recognize a good product with high potential in their territory might offer to make commitments they cannot keep.