

friction between Flemings and Walloons, Belgium is introducing a federal system of government to allow each language/culture group to have greater independence. Brussels, the capital, is officially bilingual and has a separate status. Sensitivity to regional differences is important for anyone wishing to do business in Belgium.

Complete statistical information on the Belgian economy and industry is readily available from government sources, banks or trade associations. The various trade associations are a particularly good source of information on specific manufacturing and service sectors of the economy.

Selling to the Belgian Market

As open to trade as Belgium may be, it is also a highly competitive and sophisticated market allowing duty-free access for products of its neighbours in the EEC as well as the European Free Trade Area (EFTA) countries for non-agricultural products and preferential arrangements for many developing countries. Canadian firms that hope to sell there must overcome the Common External Tariff (CET) as well as compete on the basis of quality, price and delivery.

How then does one approach this market? We cannot attempt to provide an answer which will meet everyone's needs since different products are sold in different ways, and each manufacturer has a preferred method of operation. In some cases, direct sales may be the best approach, particularly when you are selling to a large retail chain or have only a few major industrial accounts.

More typically, Canadian firms use the services of an agent or importer/distributor. There are many such organizations in Belgium but the exporter must be careful to select the best firm to do the job. Because of the competitiveness of the market, it can sometimes be difficult to locate suitable representatives who are not already fully committed.

While some representatives confine themselves to specific regions of the country, most represent the whole of Belgium and many cover Luxembourg as well. A few of the larger firms may have affiliated organizations in the Netherlands, northern France or West Germany, but this is less common. Due to the relatively small size of the market they serve, most distributors tend to be less specialized in their product lines than they would be, for example, in the United States.