

New Export Centre Targeting Global Trade

Founder was inspired by Kiwi example

Small businesses from British Columbia and the rest of the country will be welcome at a new Vancouver-based export centre designed to promote international trade, says the facility's chief executive.

Mark Mensing, founder of the Canada Export Centre, says his company will ensure space for smaller firms in addition to large players. If necessary, the centre might save spaces for smaller firms that need "hand-holding" when it comes to exporting.

"We're hosting 200 government trade missions this year alone," says Mensing. The CEC, located in the old Bank of Nova Scotia building at the corner of Hastings and Seymour, will feature 370 tradeshow-like showcases that promote the products and services of Canadian firms to overseas customers.

Exhibitors will pay an introductory price of \$7,900 per year to exhibit at the CEC and will also have access to meeting rooms, business facilities and two presentation rooms. Mensing's company will not take a percentage of sales.

In 2005, exhibition contracts will be for one year only. After the first year, they plan to offer three-year opportunities. Mensing says the number of companies applying to exhibit will likely exceed the available space in the 1,394-square-metre presentation centre, considered to be the first of its kind in Canada. All provinces and territories will be represented.

"It's called the Canada Export Centre," says Mensing. "We want to make sure that Canada is represented, not one individual province." Depending on demand, the number of spaces awarded to a province will be based on the province's population and exporting activity, says Mensing. B.C. will get roughly 60 spaces – more than its share based on population – because of the centre's location and the high export activity in the province.

"We're accepting them in the order that they come in," says Mensing. If one province or territory applies for more space than expected, another province or territory will get less. "We want to make sure that we have a really good mix, not only in a variety of different industries, but also geographically," says Mensing.

The basic requirements for entry are that companies be "semi- or export-ready." The centre is privately funded, but International Trade Canada will actively promote it, says Mensing. Among other organizations, Leading Edge B.C., a joint provincial-private marketing association designed to make the province's tech sector a world leader, is also playing an active role.

"I think Canada has a lot to offer," says Mensing. "It's just that we need to be more aggressive in showing off what we have." Exhibitors are expected to include everything from forestry companies to high-tech firms, apparel makers and wineries.

Mensing, 35, came up with the idea for an export centre while sailing on his 15-metre trimaran Bold Spirit during a two-year tour of the South Pacific. Having family in New Zealand, he was trying to find business opportunities that would allow him to return there often when he discovered a Kiwi export centre. He learned that China, Taiwan, Thailand, Australia and the Philippines have similar centres and decided that there was no better place for one than his hometown of Vancouver.

"We rely too much on the U.S. (for trade opportunities)," says Mensing. "We can grow in the U.S., but we need to expand in Europe, Asia, South America and the rest of the world." Mensing returned to Vancouver and called his old friend Michael Lyons, a real-estate investor and former owner of Lower Mainland Alarms, who now serves as CEC's president and a 50-per-cent owner.