



Vancouver gets 'permanent trade show'

International storefront modeled on similar ventures dotted around the Pacific Rim

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Michael McCullough – Vancouver Sun

Its founders describe the new Canada Export Centre as a "permanent trade show" and an "export concierge service."

The 17,000-square-foot showcase for Canadian companies downtown received its official opening Thursday afternoon, complete with politicians, foreign consular officials and a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

What may come as a surprise to passersby is this international storefront for Canadian exporters isn't costing taxpayers a cent. It's a completely private-sector, for-profit corporate marketing vehicle modeled on similar ones dotting the Pacific Rim.

As proprietors Mark Mensing, 35, and Michael Lyons, 34, explain, for \$7,900 a Canadian company can lease one of 370 display booths in the centre, which covers two floors of a former bank at Hastings and Seymour streets. Foreign trade missions and individual business people passing through town can tour the centre and, if one of the exhibitors catches their eye, get all the information and contacts they require. The visitors' own information likewise gets entered into a database available to exhibiting companies.

"It gives all these international business people one stop under one roof where they can see all kinds of products from a dozen different industries from across Canada," said Lyons, Canada Export Centre's president.

The centre also has a classroom, boardroom and computer stations available free of charge to exhibitors and visiting business people. Multilingual staff can offer assistance if there is a language barrier. Noting that more than 400 trade missions come to Vancouver every year, CEO Mensing expects the centre to host 85,000 qualified visitors in its first year.

Mensing, who previously owned a promotional products company, got the idea for such a facility after seeing one for New Zealand companies while on a sailing trip to Auckland several years ago. One in Taiwan claims to facilitate \$5 billion US worth of trade per year, he said. "It saves people so much money," Mensing said, compared to going on a trade mission or appearing at international trade shows."

He said the City of Toronto had offered space for the centre to locate there, but Vancouver is Canada's gateway to Asia, and the city's compact downtown puts the centre within easy walking distance of the business district and downtown hotels where visiting business people stay.

"Quietly open" for several weeks now, the centre has already hosted several foreign delegations, Mensing said. About 100 companies have so far signed up, including Alcan, Canfor, Ballard Power and the Port of Vancouver. There are also smaller businesses such as Glen Breton, Canada's only single-malt whisky distiller from Nova Scotia, and hot tub manufacturer Beachcomber Spas. Striving for a cross-section of Canadian business, the centre has limited the representation of any one region or industry. The 60 booths earmarked for B.C. companies are sold out. The centre is in the midst of a sales push in Ontario; Quebec is next.

The centre also has sponsors, such as HSBC Bank Canada, which offers companies doing business at the centre services including export insurance. "It's a natural fit for us," said HSBC executive vice-president, commercial banking Jeff Dowle, noting how the bank is the No. 1 import financier and No. 4 export financier in Canada.



CREDIT: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun
Mark Mensing (left) and Michael Lyons are the movers behind the just-opened, private-sector Canada Export Centre on West Hastings.