



# Canadian Reps Point To Cross-Border Similarities

Time spent speaking with several MANA members in Western Canada makes the point that there are significant differences in how fellow reps north and south of the United States-Canada border work. But at the end of the day, there are more similarities in how they work than there are differences.

On the one hand, a major difference for reps in the two countries would appear to be geography and the size of the territory covered. Starting on Canada's West Coast and moving eastward, the MANA members we spoke with are located in the Canadian Provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. From their perspective, each rep agreed that there is a shared misunderstanding on the part of many United States manufacturers concerning the geography of those provinces, the amount of territory that is covered and the sparse population. The latter point was made in comparison to more populous areas of Canada such as Toronto and Montreal and many areas of the United States.

One rep described his territory accordingly: "There's a lot of space between calls here. It's not unusual for us to have to hop on a plane and then rent a car and drive four or five hours to see a customer. There aren't that many places where we can travel and be assured that we're going to be able to complete four or five calls in a day. As a result, U.S. manufacturers ought to be aware of the expenses we incur while covering a wide area and seeing relatively few customers. Perhaps the only comparable area in the United States is that of North and South Dakota."

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## The Question of Expenses

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"The traveling expenses are vast when you consider the geographic area vs. the business population," explains Tony Alderson, Coast to Coast Hardware Sales (West) Ltd., Richmond, British Columbia. "Certainly those costs are relative when you consider the amount of business that is available. For example, it's not unusual when you have to go to Winnipeg or Saskatoon or points even farther to the north like Grand Prairie (which is probably a six hour drive north of Edmonton), that when you get there, all you have are three accounts, and you've already spent an entire day getting there."

He's hardly alone in that view of how the territory is covered. Robin Tetrault, Summit Agencies, Calgary, Alberta, offers that "for the principals we represent in Western Canada, we always find there's a lot of empty space between our calls. In comparison, in the United States when reps have to visit their princi-

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pals they can often drive and combine the trip with several customer visits along the way. That's nothing we can do. As a result, our cost per call is considerably higher than for our counterparts in the United States. There are many days when we'll make only one or two calls." He adds that in communicating with principals, the high cost of the sales call might make for a good conversation in favor of gaining an extra point or two from the principals.

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### Filling Windshield Time

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Along with the relatively sparse business population and the expanse of territory covered, the reps we spoke with are all faced with the prospect of adequately filling their windshield (either in a car or plane) time.

To answer that call John Riley, Intercoast Distributors, Inc., Edmonton, Alberta, relies on technology. "I can go for four or five days at a time out of the office without really being out of touch. I've got my laptop, Palm books and cell phone and can conduct business anywhere whether it's the hotel or airport lounge. With the cell phone, I buy blocks of time and never have a problem running out."

Alderson adds, "Everyone has their own method for making the most of their windshield time. Many people I know use God's gift to salesmen — the instructional tape — but once they're done, they're done." He continues good-naturedly that "I guess for those of us in Canada, time spent learning French would be a good idea."

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### The Need for Networking

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If travel time and relatively few customers are primary differences between what Canadian and U.S. reps have to face, one similarity is their continued desire to learn from each other. When the question was asked whether their isolation compared to reps located in a populous area makes them more desirous of networking opportunities with their fellow reps, they all answered in the affirmative.

Part of the proof of Tetrault's desire to meet with and learn from other reps is his continued membership in MANA and Power-Motion Technology Representatives Association (PTRA), not to mention his enrollment in MRERF's CPMR program which took him and fellow reps to Arizona earlier this year. According to Tetrault, "Because of my activities and the organizations I belong to, I feel I have a fair bit of interaction, especially with U.S. agencies that are in my industry. In addition, over the years many of the reps I've met have become close personal friends. As a result, we're always talking about business. In Western Canada, however, there's not that much of an opportunity to interact with other reps. That interaction is something I'd really like to do because when you run into others, especially those covering other industries, you never fail to learn something that can help you."

Alderson points to the relatively short distance between Vancouver and Seattle when he casts a vote in favor of networking. "I'm inclined to think there would be success if we were able to arrange networking opportunities with reps in the Seattle area. Being located on the West Coast, we have similar concerns and historically we've had very good cooperation with reps there."

And finally, John Riley takes care of a lot of his networking needs by his participation in what he calls a Mastermind Group. This group is composed of professionals in the construction and related industries. "We all know a lot of the same people, and they deal constantly with the same issues I do on a daily basis. I rely on them, and they rely on me for expert input and assistance." □

In the months to come we'll continue to explore the differences between the Canadian and U.S.-based MANA member reps. If readers wish to comment on the differences/similarities between the two, please feel free to contact the editor of *Agency Sales* magazine.  
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