



Taking The Pain Out Of The Border Crossing

If the process of crossing the border between Canada and the United States was once almost as painless as traveling from one state to another, that belief has been put to rest. According to some Canadian reps whose business requires them to cross the border with regularity, the events of September 11, 2001, not only pushed the United States to center stage in a world in turmoil, they also made crossing the border into this country something that some reps avoid whenever possible.

Before we get into tips on how to cross the border in an expeditious manner, here's how some Canadian reps describe a process that appears to be just about as pleasant as a visit to the dentist.

"Whenever I travel to the United States," explains Jim Keiller, Electrical Insulation & Products, Mississauga, Ontario, "I enter the country as a professional businessman who is either visiting a principal or attending a trade show. While crossing the border was once fairly painless, that has all changed since 9/11.

"Owing largely to the fact the service received by border personnel is less than polite, I find the process fairly intimidating. For instance, recently I had to travel to Dearborn, Michigan, for a tradeshow. I had a catalog and some product samples with me. I had never had a problem before, but this time I was pulled off to the side and told I had to enter a building and pay some sort of a fee. That was just the beginning. What happened inside the building was ludicrous. First, I was told to walk over to the white



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computer located in a room full of people. An officer came over and yelled at me to sit down. Someone else came over and told me not to sit there, but stand up and go elsewhere. Finally, someone came over, took my five dollars and let me out of there.”

Keiller continues, “What I’m looking for is to be treated like the professional that I am. I’m sure I don’t fit any profile other than that of a 50-year-old businessman. I don’t think any of us needs to be subjected to some sort of Laurel and Hardy routine.”

Not All Crossings are the Same

He adds that what he encountered on his way to Dearborn was not typical of all border crossings, but it did leave a negative impression. “Detroit has always been bad and I make every effort to avoid Buffalo, but if you cross in Vermont or places like Ogdensburg, New York, it’s not nearly as bad.”



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Al Brosseau

Here’s what another Canadian rep says: “If I can avoid it, I just don’t cross the border any more. For me, it’s become an unfriendly experience. The United States isn’t inviting people in the way it used to. I can understand that to an extent, but they should keep in mind that we’re their friends. I find that traveling in and among the countries of Asia and even Israel is much easier.”

However, there’s a downside to avoiding travel into the United States, as pointed out by Keiller. In considering the amount of business done with each other, he says, “The United States is like the elephant and we’re the mouse. If businesses in the United States stop doing business with us, that’s about a 10% drop for them. If it’s the other way around, however, that translates into a 90% drop in business for us. That’s nothing we can afford.”

Les Rapchak, Tech Sales Co., Richmond Hills, Ontario, Canada, notes that “I’m sure we have the same problem at our border, but it seems to me that technology could be put to better use here in order to ease the problem.”

While those are some of the difficulties Canadian reps say they encounter at the border, they did have some tips for their peers on how to make the journey a little less perilous. Among the tips offered by reps on how to make the trip as bearable as possible are to:

- Have a passport ready for proper identification. At one time, a driver’s license with picture was more than sufficient. But as events occurred, that no longer is sufficient. All the reps we spoke with emphasized how important it was to present a passport.
- Be ready to answer all questions asked by border personnel. One rep offered the view that only answers to specific questions asked should be provided. “What we as salesmen do too often is to provide too much information,” he explains. “If we’re asked something, politely provide the answer and no other information.”

Keep Business Papers Together

- If business is to be conducted on the U.S. side of the border, keep all pertinent papers in an easily-accessible file. Al Brosseau, CPMR, MANA’s District 10 Director, notes that he’s had virtually no problems crossing the border. A reason for that may be that he’s settled on a procedure whereby he keeps all documents pertaining to a given trip inside a convenient file folder. When he reaches the border, he simply hands the folder to the border official. “The last

time I crossed the border, the officer barely opened it. He knew ahead of time all my paperwork was in order," he explains.

All the reps we spoke with, however, cautioned how important it was to have documents of origin if any product samples are being brought across the border.

- In addition to answering only the questions being asked when crossing the border, reps add how important it is to be polite with border crossing officers. "Keep in mind that many of the officers are former military personnel," explains Brosseau. "It's impor-

tant to treat them as such. When they ask for an answer, it doesn't do any harm to be very polite and say 'Yes sir,' or 'No sir.'"

- Brosseau adds that it is also a good idea to foster a personal relationship when possible. "Recently, I had occasion to make repeated trips over the border and it seemed that each time I encountered the same officer. Finally, I just said, 'Remember me from last week? How are you today?'" He notes that the tone of the officer changed right away and remained that way every time he crossed the border. □

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