



Global Affairs  
Canada

Affaires mondiales  
Canada

# 2022 Trade Commissioner Service Interviews of Potential Clients

## Summary

**Prepared for Global Affairs Canada**

**Supplier: EKOS RESEARCH ASSOCIATES INC.**

**Contract number: CW2239480**

**Contract value: \$63,878.90**

**Award date: September 12, 2022**

**Delivery date: March 14, 2023**

**Registration number: POR 041-22**

For more information on this report, please contact Public Opinion Research at [ROP-  
ROP@international.gc.ca](mailto:ROP@international.gc.ca)

*Ce rapport est aussi disponible en français*

 Government  
of Canada    Gouvernement  
du Canada

Canada 

## **2022 Trade Commissioner Service Interviews of Potential Clients**

### **Summary**

**Prepared for Global Affairs Canada**

**Supplier name:** EKOS RESEARCH ASSOCIATES INC.

**Date:** March 2023

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Entrevues 2022 du Service des délégués commerciaux avec des clients potentiels.

This public opinion research report presents the results of in-depth interviews conducted by EKOS Research Associates Inc. between November 4 and December 9, 2022 on behalf of Global Affairs Canada. The research study was conducted with 39 representatives of Canadian organizations planning to export, or already exporting, services or products outside of Canada and who have not used the services of the Trade Commissioner Service in the previous 3 years.

This publication may be reproduced for non-commercial purposes only. Prior written permission must be obtained from Global Affairs Canada. For more information on this report, please contact Public Opinion Research at [POR-ROP@international.gc.ca](mailto:POR-ROP@international.gc.ca).

**Catalogue number:** FR5-216/2022E-PDF

**International Standard Book Number (ISBN):** 978-0-660-47872-2

© His Majesty the King in Right of Canada, as represented by the Ministers of Global Affairs Canada, 2023

## A. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The Trade Commissioner Service (TCS) is a service offered by Global Affairs Canada (GAC) that provides expert advice and support to Canadian businesses on matters related to exploring and growing opportunities in foreign markets; improving access to foreign markets; attracting foreign investment; Canadian direct investment abroad; and innovation. With offices across Canada and a presence in more than 150 cities worldwide, the TCS helps thousands of businesses each year. The TCS also works with partner organizations such as provincial or municipal governments or industry associations that deliver programs and services to Canadian businesses.

The TCS regularly conducts research with existing clients, including client-experience quantitative surveys investigating performance and client satisfaction, along with in-depth qualitative research relating to client experience. There is a dearth of information, however, on exporting firms that are not current TCS clients. This is either because these firms have never used, or no longer use, TCS services or have not yet started exploring exporting opportunities for their business. The TCS identified the need to obtain feedback from small and medium-sized exporters who may be potential clients to understand their needs, challenges and the ways in which the TCS can support their exporting activities. This research with potential clients will also inform the implementation of the GAC digital evolution strategy that will target a larger client base through the Digital Experience Platform.

Having increased knowledge of potential TCS clients will support GAC's strategic outcomes and operational priorities in support of increased and more diverse trade and investment. The objective is to enable Canadian businesses to grow internationally and create economic opportunities and, ultimately, to raise the standard of living for all Canadians.

Specifically, the objectives of the interviews with potential clients are to:

- understand the needs of potential TCS clients and to help determine if the TCS can enhance its services, for example, through a digital platform to reach and support more Canadian exporting firms
- identify opportunities for improvement in the delivery of international business development services to Canadian businesses across the TCS's entire network of trade offices

## **B. METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative research involved 39 interviews with Canadian companies planning on or currently exporting services or products outside of Canada and who had not used TCS services in the previous 3 years. A sample of interview participants was drawn from a research panel of Canadian businesses maintained by the Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC). With the assistance of the BDC, business representatives responding to BDC's 2022 fall survey were informed about the TCS interview research. Interested representatives were asked to use a link set up and hosted by EKOS Research (external to BDC) to complete screening questions about the nature and history of their export business. Representatives were also asked to confirm that they had not received TCS services in the previous 3 years. A total of 81 small to medium-sized businesses initially agreed to participate in a 50- to 60-minute interview. Among the 81 organizations satisfying the criteria and providing consent to further contact, a further 5 were found to have received a service at some point in the previous 3 years and were removed from the sample. Among the remaining 76 representatives who were sent email invitations, 39 participated in an interview.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. The guide included questions about participants' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and their needs for support in conducting their international business, as well as about their experiences looking for information to support their efforts, support they may have received from other organizations, and awareness of the TCS and what it offers.

An incentive of \$150 was offered for each interview, and only one interview was conducted per business sampled. The 39 interviews (34 in English, 5 in French) were conducted between November 4 and December 9, 2022.

Interviews were conducted using the Recollective online consultation platform, although a few were conducted by telephone or Zoom, and each was recorded to ensure accurate summary notes could be prepared for each discussion, with informed consent obtained in advance. Notes were subsequently developed from each recorded interview.

The analysis of the interview findings included a review of each participants' response for a given question—looking for major themes pertaining to each issue area, any nuances in opinion among the different types of participants, and anonymized, illustrative quotes. It should be noted that the results are qualitative in nature. The analysis is based on multiple reviews of the notes by the senior researchers conducting the interviews. These results cannot be generalized or used to estimate the percentage of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) conducting business

internationally who are not currently using TCS services and have had a similar experience or hold similar views. Results from the interviews do, however, provide insight into the challenges and support needs of this segment of SMEs conducting business internationally, particularly in the last few years. In addition, the interviews shed light on the information sources and methods used by some organizations and their awareness level regarding the TCS, through illustrative experience and perspectives described in the interviews.

## **C. KEY FINDINGS**

### **Sources of information**

Most participants said they had looked for information and services to support international business. Only those who were in the early stages of their planning process, and had not yet exported internationally, had not sought any information. Participants most often mentioned BDC and the Export Development Canada (EDC) as sources of information and support. EDC was noted as having provided information about receivables and insurance, or general advice and support. BDC was cited as a source of financial information or advice, or broad-based intelligence or strategy.

About half of the participants mentioned industry or business associations as a source they have used for information about and support for export activities. This source can include trade publications, newsletters, meetings or webinars. Membership in a business association both locally and abroad has been a source of support for these participants.

Brokers, along with shipping or freight forwarding companies, have been a source of information or support for a few participants, helping with regulations and processes in target markets. For other participants, such information may not have been specific enough.

A few participants also mentioned provincial organizations as a source of information and support.

### **Methods used to obtain information**

Most often, participants use their personal network of contacts and colleagues as a key source of information. These contacts are used because they are trusted sources who understand the needs of the business, market or sector. Some participants also mentioned conferences and trade shows in Canada and in key markets as another method of obtaining and sharing information. A few participants also fulfill their information needs by conducting their own online research

and/or purchasing market reports. Overall, participants said it is most valuable to seek and use information that is specific to their business, intended market, or unique problem or requirement.

### **Awareness and use of TCS**

As mentioned above, some participants identified BDC and EDC when asked if they were aware of support offered by the Government of Canada. Aside from BDC or EDC, participants showed a very low level of awareness of other federal government support programs for businesses exporting internationally.

Some participants were aware of the TCS, having had some previous contact with them—almost always many years prior. A handful were made aware of the TCS through their interactions with either BDC or EDC. Among those who were aware of the TCS or had direct contact with the TCS at some point in the past, only a few had an understanding of the support that the TCS can provide for businesses exporting internationally. A few perceived that the TCS only supports larger businesses. Some participants felt that the TCS should be doing more to reach out to businesses and build awareness of the support it provides.

Most participants were interested in connecting with the TCS for assistance and advice on exporting internationally. Some indicated that they would like the TCS to reach out to them to offer assistance and noted generally that the Government of Canada has information on business activities and contact information to facilitate this. Some said that they would go online to learn more about the TCS and how to reach a trade commissioner, either in Canada or abroad.

### **Obstacles/challenges**

Most participants experienced challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These included a disruption in demand and restrictions on travel related to business development. Participants also noted challenges related to shipping costs and delays, access to financing or funding, and hiring and retaining labour. A few identified regulatory requirements, tariffs, protectionist practices and currency fluctuations.

Many participants expect that most of their business-related challenges will remain over the next 5 years, with the pandemic exacerbating challenges that already existed.

## **Need for TCS services**

When thinking of the challenges they expect to face over the next 5 years, many participants felt that TCS services would be useful for their business. When potential TCS activities were described to them, many participants felt that obtaining information on qualified contacts in Canada or abroad would be a valuable service. Some specified that they would welcome or expect to receive strategic business advice from the TCS in terms of how to approach a new market, or gain a more holistic overview of factors to consider when entering a specific market.

Some participants felt that it would be useful to obtain market intelligence or a list of events or trade fairs from the TCS. Participants also specified that such information would need to be customized or targeted for their specific business needs.

Information or advice in locating financial or funding assistance was of interest primarily to participants in the development stage or not yet exporting. Very few participants generally thought they would be eligible for any funding. Some participants considered that practical information provided by TCS on timing and organizing a business trip, responsible business practices in foreign markets, and organizations or companies in foreign markets would be useful when exporting internationally.

## **Offering TCS services online**

Many participants felt that some of the services offered by the TCS could be provided online, in addition to one-on-one services. However, most participants emphasized the importance of one-on-one contact and felt that individual and personalized contact would be necessary in any services provided by the TCS. Some participants stated that once one-on-one contact was established and the TCS was aware of their business and needs, it could potentially be helpful to go online for updates. Some participants expressed interest in an online forum to be able to learn from other businesses who are exporting internationally. These participants felt that the TCS could set up peer-to-peer connections to share knowledge and experiences in exporting and entering new markets.

## **D. NOTE TO READERS**

As per section 10.2.3 of the Standards for the Conduct of Government of Canada Public Opinion Research—Qualitative Research, “Qualitative research is designed to reveal a rich range of opinions and interpretations rather than to measure what percentage of the target population holds a given opinion. These results must not be used to estimate the numeric proportion or

number of individuals in the population who hold a particular opinion because they are not statistically projectable.”<sup>1</sup> In order to avoid portraying these results as generalizable to the population, terms such as “a few,” “some” and “most,” rather than specific percentages, are used to broadly indicate views. To ensure a common understanding of the terms used in the analysis, the following guidelines were used in analyzing and reporting on participant results:

- “a few participants” = at least 2 people but fewer than 25%
- “some participants” = 25% to 49%
- “many participants” = 50% to 75%
- “most participants” = over 75%

It should also be understood that the information provided by participants is subjective in nature and based on their own recollections and perceptions and on information provided by Canadian business representatives. The screening questionnaire is found in Appendix A, and the interview guide is found in Appendix B.


## **E. EXPENDITURE**

The contract value for this project was \$63,878.90 HST included.

## **F. POLITICAL NEUTRALITY CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify as Senior Officer of EKOS Research Associates Inc. that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada’s political neutrality requirements outlined in the Policy on Communications and Federal Identity and the Directive on the Management of Communications. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed by:

  
Susan Galley (Vice President)

---

<sup>1</sup> Public Services and Procurement Canada. [Standards for the Conduct of Government of Canada Public Opinion Research - Qualitative Research](#). Last updated: Spring 2019.