

# **Job Description – Foreign Trade Representative**

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**For further information contact:**

Peter Bennett  
Trade Development Consultant  
12 New Grange Road  
Blackrock  
Co. Dublin  
Ireland

Tel: +353 1 2892187  
Mobile: +353 87 797 5982  
Email: PeterBennett1@Eircom.net

## The role of a Foreign Trade Representative

An effective FTR will give the trade advisory service a commercial edge, will proactively work with a group of client exporters and will do substantive work for a number of strategically important small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

The majority of offices in a foreign trade office network will be staffed by experienced generalists with a keen interest in commerce and in business. Over time they will gain knowledge of specific markets and specific sectors. Aptitude for the job is an ingredient for success. Much of the training is on-the-job training.

The most successful Trade Support Institutions (TSIs) recognise that some trade promotional jobs are specialised. They recruit the best qualified people available. The makeup of the client base usually informs the background of the people that are hired. If a key industry sector is "food" the organisation will hire executives with a "food industry" background, particularly for the support unit in head office.

Some TSIs open up recruitment for key posts to external candidates. The successful candidate might be retained on a 3 or 5 year contract. Typically, the successful candidates have knowledge of a specific market or industry sector. It is common to hire an external candidate with specific knowledge of a high-tech sector or of sectors deemed to be of strategic importance. Invariably these appointments improve the standing of the TSI with the private sector. The nationality of staff is normally not an important factor.

In peripheral markets, or markets that do not warrant the appointment of a full time FTR, local trade consultants can be retained on a per assignment basis. The use of local consultants on a per assignment basis can significantly stretch a trade promotion budget. Market coverage could be gained at a fraction of the cost of opening a trade office and staffing it with expatriate personnel.

The majority of trade offices are small. However, in a large trade office industry sectors may be allocated to specific staff. The basic division would be consumer products, food and beverage, and industrial products. In strategically important markets, specialists may be employed, similarly to the support unit in head office.

## Training and professional development

It is necessary to continuously train staff to ensure they are familiar with emerging business models, trends and technologies. Much of this training is in-house and “on-the job”. Frequent contact with industry is considered an integral part of this process.

A FTR gains experience from answering exporters’ enquiries; undertaking research assignments, and arranging exporter business missions and business partner searches. Research assignments enable the FTR to develop in depth knowledge of specific product sectors. Identifying business partners for client exporters provides the FTR with opportunities to develop relationships with importers, distributors and buyers.

Some TSIs work in partnership with third level academic institutions to provide formal training in international marketing, typically to MBA level.

## FTR work programmes and tasks

The bulk of a work programme must be derived from strategically important sectors of industry. Otherwise resources are diluted. If the FTR is to function effectively a support mechanism must be in place in the home market. The prime function of this unit is to identify the needs of industry, and to translate these needs into work programmes for the FTRs. The bulk of clients will fall into the SME category.

In the absence of a support function in the home market, it is very unlikely that a FTR can be effective.

## Job description

A generic job description for a FTR would be so generalised as to be almost useless. However, there are some key tasks that could be worked into a job description. Here is a list:

- To support the business sector in its efforts to achieve export growth.
- To develop contact with buyers and procurement personnel.
- To identify business partners for client exporters.
- To advise client exporters on appropriate market entry strategies for specific markets.

- To provide a quality trade and marketing advisory service to client exporters.
- To strengthen the relationship with client companies in order to encourage and support their commitment to export growth.
- To monitor the performance of exports and exporters, and provide senior management with an early warning if there is an adverse shift in the host country's economic climate.
- To represent the country's industry at relevant fora. This includes, speaking engagements and presentations to industrial groups.
- To contribute to policy debates.
- To prepare briefing material for government and senior management on market related issues.
- To manage PR and the press.
- To develop a relationship with professional advisors.
- To retain the services of and to manage specialised consultants.
- To manage trade fairs and other group promotional activities.
- To help exporters establish distribution in a specific market.
- To undertake market research assignments.
- To set up business missions for exporters.
- To manage a trade office, including budgets and staff.
- Investment promotion (foreign direct investment)
- To engage in representational activities.

In some cases the FTR has responsibility for foreign direct investment, promoting tourism and bilateral trade issues. This makes for a very complex job description.

### Examples

Here are extracts from two advertisements for a FTR. The advertisements appeared in major European newspapers in 2005. One was for a trade representative based in London, and the other for a trade representative to work in the home market with the specific industry sector.

The advertisements specified location and salary range. This information is omitted from the two examples.

The examples are to illustrate the level of experience demanded by an advanced TSI of their FTRs.

***FTR based in London***

*Your role will be to help clients to take advantage of opportunities in the <market sector specified> by providing access to buyers, developing relationships with key decision makers and advising clients on the unique procurement process of the <market sector>.*

*You must have a minimum of X years experience in the <market sector>, preferably gained within a <description> environment. You must have a clear understanding of the <market sector's> buying process, ideally with experience in working with key decision makers. You must possess credibility and contacts within the <market sector> and a relevant degree is essential.*

*You should have excellent communication skills and a strong understanding of the strategic sales and marketing process*

***FTR based in the home market***

*“.....the successful candidate will be responsible for working in collaboration with clients to identify and advice on technology issues that impact on their growth and development in <industry sector/s>. He/She will have a significant role in the development of the TSI's strategies for the <industry sector/s>, and will be expected to provide specialist advice to client companies.....he/she will also undertake technical assessments and evaluations in support of .....The candidate will have strong technical experience, ideally in a commercial environment. Practical experience in ..... is essential.*

## Notes