



Shipping from Canada to the United States:

Understanding the Customs Clearance
Process to Expand your Canadian Business

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Determine if the U.S. Market is Right for Your Business

The first step in [exporting from Canada to the United States](#) is determining if there is demand for your products. Chances are there is, given the size and scope of the U.S. market. But figuring out where that demand is located, identifying potential customers, and determining how to make your products stand out are among the top challenges you will need to address.

In starting the process, it's necessary to understand that no single entity qualifies as "the U.S. market." Instead, the United States should be seen as multiple sub-markets,

with each focused on a specific industry, geographic region, group of consumers, cultural group, and so on. For example, each of the country's 50 states operates its own trade office, and proudly promotes import and export opportunities within its boundaries.

A manufacturer of agricultural/farm equipment would probably not want to target midtown Manhattan or downtown Los Angeles, just as an ice hockey equipment company should probably choose Minnesota or Wisconsin over Miami Beach or southern Arizona.

Your business will also need to ensure its products are “America-ready.” This includes ensuring you can accommodate cross-border sales, both in terms of inventory and staff resources, and that you have thought through additional considerations. The Canadian government developed a [list of pertinent questions](#) for potential exporters, some of which include:

- What advantages does your product or service have that will help you succeed in the highly competitive U.S. market?
- Will your product or service need to be adapted for the U.S. market? For example, will your oak cabinets warp in the humid conditions of the southern U.S.?
- Will your product or service need different packaging and promotional materials? For example, will brochures need to be in English and Spanish?
- Can you obtain the financing needed to promote your product or service in the U.S.?

And another important question to address:

- Have you developed a shipping strategy for reaching the U.S. market? Depending on your business, you may need a plan for ensuring on-time deliveries to consumers’ residences, as well as a strategy for shipping to retailers, industrial facilities, and other professional locations.



Did You Know?

America’s population of 330 million people is almost 10 times the size of the Canadian market. California alone, with a population of 39.1 million people, exceeds Canada’s total population of 38.2 million.



Market Research and Advance Planning are Essential

Market research is an essential step for any Canadian business interested in the U.S. market. An exhaustive look at U.S. market conditions will allow a Canadian business to gauge demand for its products, identify potential competitors, and determine regions of the country that would be likely customer bases.

[Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada \(ISED\)](#) offers a number of online tools and databases that can help businesses gauge demand and identify potential markets. ISED suggests reviewing recent Canadian export activity to determine the extent to which there is demand for your products. Additional resources are available through [Canada's Trade Commissioner Service \(TCS\)](#) including access to trade professionals, trade events, and potential funding sources.

Did You Know?

U.S. eCommerce sales are expected to exceed \$1 trillion during 2022, with an overall retail sales forecast of nearly \$5 trillion.

eCommerce—A “Land of Opportunity” for Canadian Businesses

Any discussion about expanding to the United States must include an overview of the country's eCommerce sales environment. Export Development Canada refers to the U.S. eCommerce market as a “[land of opportunity](#)” for Canadian brands, noting that the “size of the market, relative ease of entry, and close proximity to Canada makes the U.S. an appealing target for a Canadian business that is looking to expand.”

This presents a significant opportunity for Canadian businesses to take advantage of the vibrant, diverse, and growing U.S. eCommerce market.

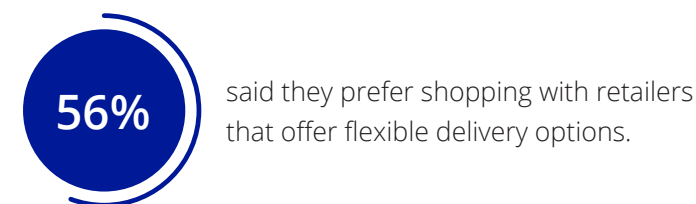
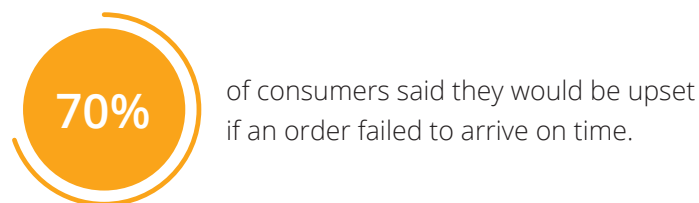
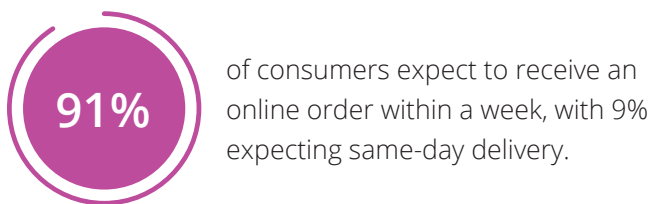
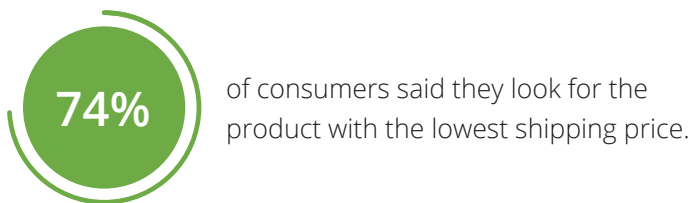
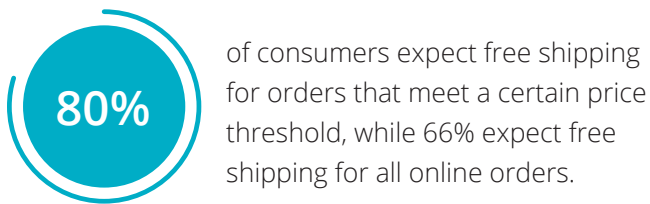
- The United States is the world's [second-largest eCommerce market](#), accounting for almost 20% of total global spending. (China is first, accounting for 52% of total spending.)
- 2022 research by [eMarketer](#) found half of all U.S. adults shop online at least once a week—with 16% doing so each day!
- Canadian retailers get a boost from a provision of U.S. trade law commonly referred to as “Section 321.” Under [Section 321](#), shipments entering the United States valued at less than US\$800 are exempt from duties and taxes. The Section 321 price threshold is referred to as “de minimis,” and helps Canadian businesses compete against U.S. businesses.
- Online retailers also receive preferential treatment through a provision of the [United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement \(USMCA\)](#) that provides informal entry for shipments valued at less than US\$2,500. Informal entries generally benefit from reduced paperwork requirements and a simplified customs clearance process.

Check out our article: [Understanding the USMCA Agreement: Your Top Questions Answered](#)

Plan Your Entry—Partner with Care

However, as enticing and potentially lucrative as U.S. eCommerce may be, it is very competitive. U.S. consumers have plenty of options when it comes to online shopping, and retailers are constantly reminded of the need to meet expectations across several categories including inventory/selection, pricing, website usability, and shipping/delivery.

This means Canadian retailers will need to factor in the extra time and costs associated with crossing the border, while also addressing core U.S. consumer expectations. Research by [Jungle Scout](#) found current expectations include:



Many Canadian businesses choose to sell directly to the U.S. market, either by opening a U.S. branch or establishing a separate U.S. subsidiary. While each of these routes can be highly successful, and a good way to introduce your products to the American market, they do involve legal and tax implications. Canada's [Trade Commissioner Service](#) advises any Canadian company interested in direct sales within the United States to "obtain the services of an American lawyer or a lawyer well acquainted with U.S. law."

Other businesses find it preferable to partner with a U.S. company, thereby avoiding the difficult task of identifying customers and building a presence from the ground up.



Our [checklist](#) helps explain U.S. export requirements



A photograph of two business professionals, a man and a woman, in an office setting. The man, wearing a light blue button-down shirt, is looking at a document held by the woman, who is wearing a red blazer over a white shirt. They are both holding documents and a laptop, suggesting a collaborative work environment. The background is a blurred office space with large windows.

The Planning Begins: Steps for Building Cross-Border Shipping and Customs Strategies

Initiating the Planning Phase: Key Steps for Developing Strategies in Cross-Border Shipping and Customs

Operating in the U.S. is quite different from selling within Canada. This means a Canadian business must consider all aspects of doing business in the United States, and develop written plans that address multiple scenarios. Here are a few steps to help guide the way:

STEP 1

Assess your [cross-border logistics](#) needs. Start by asking these questions:

1. How will you ensure on-time deliveries to your U.S. customers?
2. What volume do you expect to ship?
3. What types of facilities will you be shipping to? Manufacturing facilities? Professional offices? Retailers? Consumers' homes?
4. How can you ensure consistent levels of service to customers located in different regions of the country?
5. How will you handle [product returns](#)?

These are among the many factors to consider in [building a U.S.-specific logistics strategy](#).

Once you have an idea of your logistics needs, you will need to enlist a logistics partner with the required [cross-border capabilities](#) and [customs expertise](#). Spend the time to identify a logistics provider with advanced capabilities in both the U.S. and Canada and the resources to build a solution that addresses your unique needs. This may include the use of ground and express courier and [freight services](#) for some shipments, for example, but air service for others. You will also want to use a provider that offers multiple delivery options, depending on each shipment's delivery requirements. Other features to look for include [customs expertise](#), on-time performance, distribution and fulfillment capabilities, [last mile services](#), and of course, a strong commitment to customer service.



[Purolator's Trade Assistant](#) helps simplify the customs clearance process

STEP 2

Prioritize the customs clearance process, which is detailed below. Customs clearance is an unavoidable part of cross-border commerce. Take the time to understand how the process works and familiarize yourself with the information and documentation you will need to provide.

STEP 3

Determine if you will enlist a [customs broker](#) to manage the process on your behalf.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) strongly recommends—but does not require—use of a customs broker for commercial entries. A customs broker will facilitate the process and ensure compliance with all requirements. However, keep in mind that you, as the importer of record, remain liable for the accuracy of all information submitted to CBP on your behalf.

STEP 4

Agree on your shipping terms. Do you want your shipments to arrive in the U.S. with duties paid or unpaid? Are you going to act as the importer of record or would you prefer to have your customers collect their shipments from customs? These are among the many considerations you will need to work out with your buyers ahead of time.

A set of 11 internationally-recognized shipping terms—known as Incoterms—clarify responsibilities for buyers and sellers, including costs, risks, and performance. With regard to customs management and duty payment, only one Incoterm, “Delivered Duty Paid,” assigns responsibility for the customs process to the seller. There are many variables in determining the correct Incoterm, which means a business must carefully consider the pros and cons of each option, and choose—in advance—the appropriate terms of service.



The ICC offers [detailed information](#) about IncoTerms





U.S. Customs Clearance— an Unavoidable Step in the Exporting Process

Exporting Essentials: The Unavoidable Necessity of U.S. Customs Clearance



Did You Know?

Although the USMCA provides duty-free status for qualified goods, a shipper must specifically request benefits. Benefits are not applied automatically. Failure to request benefits could result in a shipper missing out on significant savings.

Every product entering the United States must meet strict and precise customs requirements, as required by the [U.S. Customs and Border Protection \(CBP\)](#) agency. This includes ensuring that products are eligible to be brought into the United States, providing detailed shipment information, obtaining necessary licenses and permits, payment of duties and taxes, and compliance with other protocols.

Specific requirements will vary based on the characteristics of each shipment. Each shipper is responsible for determining the full scope of requirements that apply to its products, and ensuring full compliance.

Purolator's [Trade Assistant](#) helps identify tariff classification codes and determine duties



Determine Eligibility—Certain Products Require Special Permits or Licenses

The first step is to determine if your products are eligible for importation. Most products are, but products including certain types of [medical equipment](#) require explicit approval by a controlling federal agency. These agencies are known as partner government agencies (PGAs).

CBP enforces trade laws and regulations on behalf of [nearly 50 different PGAs](#). Each PGA has responsibility for imports of products that fall under its scope of authority. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), for example, sets import requirements for medical devices, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and other health-related products.

Depending on a shipment's contents, different permits and licenses may be required, along with product samples and other types of information. A shipment may also owe duties and taxes, or fall under the scope of an international treaty. Imports of certain wood products (furniture, guitars, decorative bowls, etc.) for example, may be subject to provisions of the international [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora \(CITES\) treaty](#), which regulates movement of endangered species of wildlife and plants.

In most instances, a product will be cleared for import once the required documentation—usually a permit or license—is provided. But without the required approvals, a PGA-regulated item will not be allowed into the country.



Restrictions and prohibited items in the U.S.

Examples of restricted items



Cosmetics



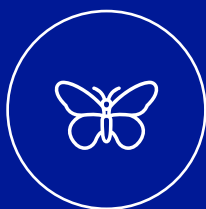
Coffee



Fruits
and nuts



Fish
products



Insects and
reptiles



Pharmaceutical
products

Examples of prohibited items



Cured and
dried meat



Charcoal
briquettes



Plant and
plant products



Radiation-emitting
electronic products



Reprints of U.S.
copyrighted work





Products Prohibited from Importation or Subject to Quotas

While most products are eligible for importation, some are restricted, subject to quota, or outright prohibited. Examples of prohibited items include products made with forced labour, contraband, and certain agricultural or livestock products. In addition, products determined to have been “dumped” by a foreign government at a reduced price may also be banned.

Other products may be subject to quotas and denied entry once the established import level has been reached. According to [CBP](#), quotas are established to control the amount of a specific commodity imported into the United States. Different types of quotas include:

- **Tariff-rate quotas.** In some instances, a quota determines the amount of a product that may enter the United States at a reduced rate of tariff. Products can still enter the United States once that quantity is reached, but at a higher tariff rate.
- **Absolute quotas.** An absolute quota establishes a firm cutoff, with no additional products eligible for importation once that level is reached.

Currently, [no products](#) are subject to absolute quotas. Commodities subject to tariff-rate quotas include dairy products, brooms, upland cotton, tuna, and ethyl alcohol, among other products.

While most products are not subject to quotas or prohibitions, an importer should make no assumptions about eligibility. Instead, as advised by CBP, a shipper should contact the agency with jurisdiction over its products to determine the proper protocols.

Formal Entry, Informal Entry, and [Section 321 Programs](#)

Did You Know?



U.S.
2/3 SPENDING



CANADA
1/2 SPENDING

U.S. consumer spending accounts for two-thirds of the country’s overall gross domestic product (GDP). By comparison, spending by Canadian consumers accounts for slightly more than half of GDP.

U.S. imports are generally categorized as either a formal entry or an informal entry, depending on their value, and whether they are considered controlled goods. Other products may fall under the scope of a provision of U.S. trade law known as [Section 321](#) which exempts products valued below \$800 from duties and taxes. Following is a brief overview of each:

- **Informal entry.** Shipments valued at less than US\$2,500 qualify as an informal entry. These shipments do not require a customs broker or a customs bond. Informal entries generally have less stringent documentation requirements than formal entries.

- **Formal entry.** Formal entry is required for any shipment valued at more than \$2,500 and requires the posting of a customs bond. Formal entries must meet detailed documentation and information requirements. CBP strongly recommends the use of a customs broker to manage formal entry filings, although the practice is not required.
- **De minimis entry/Section 321 shipments.** CBP exempts products valued at less than \$800 from duties and taxes. This exemption is called a “de minimis entry,” and is rooted in [Section 321](#) of the Tariff Act of 1930. The purpose of the exemption is to facilitate the entry of low-value shipments, thereby freeing up CBP agents to focus on higher-value, potentially riskier shipments.

Documentation Requirements— Prioritize Accuracy to Reduce Delays

Shippers are obligated to complete all required paperwork and documentation, including [commercial invoices](#), accurately and thoroughly. While this may seem obvious, most shipment delays are caused by missing, erroneous, or incomplete paperwork. Most often, problems occur when identifying a product’s tariff classification, country of origin, or valuation. Following is a brief overview of each:

- **Tariff Classification:** International trade works because traders across the globe follow the same set of rules as outlined in a classification system known as the [Harmonized System \(HS\)](#). The HS is maintained by the [World Customs Organization](#), located in Brussels, Belgium, and consists of a catalogue of 6-digit codes that cover 98% of goods traded between countries. Because of the HS classification system, product descriptions are “harmonized,” so that all parties have the same understanding of a product’s precise characteristics. Because of the HS, for example, a shipment of red delicious apples grown in Great Britain, will have the same HS code as a shipment of red delicious apples grown in the United States.

Each country is free to expand on the core 6-digit HS code, as a way to capture additional shipment information. In Canada, the tariff classification system is called the [Customs Tariff](#), and features a listing of 10-digit codes. The first 6 numbers are from the HS, and the subsequent 4 are unique to Canada, and used to track imports and exports, along with other data

The United States also relies on a 10-digit classification system called the [Harmonized Tariff Schedule \(HTS\)](#). The HTS is maintained by the U.S. International Trade Commission (ITC). Every product arriving at the U.S. border must have a tariff classification code assigned from the HTS.

But with thousands of classification codes from which to choose, identifying the correct code can be difficult. For one thing, product descriptions can vary slightly from one code to the next. But, one code may have a higher tariff rate, or determine eligibility for free trade agreement benefits. As difficult as the process can be, it’s important to assign the correct classification. A few tools are available to help shippers in this process including:

- **HTS Search Tool**—This is an [interactive online database](#) maintained by the ITC. The intuitive system assists users in identifying the correct tariff classification and provides a channel for requesting assistance from ITC trade professionals.
- **Purolator Trade Assistant**—Shippers can also access [Purolator’s online trade tool](#), which assists in identifying the correct classification.
- **Advance Rulings**—Shippers can contact CBP before a shipment arrives at the border and ask for a determination of the correct HTS code. This is known as an [“advance ruling.”](#) While this will avoid uncertainty, a shipper is required to use the CBP determination, even if the shipper has reason to question its accuracy.

- **Country of Origin:** A product's [country of origin](#), according to CBP, refers to its "country of manufacture, production, or growth." For some products, agricultural crops, minerals, or oil, for example, the country of origin is obvious. Other times though, it can be complicated. This is because a product's country of origin takes into account the origin of each component, as well as the country in which the product was assembled or manufactured.

A dress manufacturer, for example, would have to consider the country/countries from which it obtained zippers, buttons, fabrics, ribbons, and thread, for example, as well as the country in which the dress was sewn and manufactured. Once all that information is considered, a determination is made as to which country qualifies as the correct country of origin

Identifying the correct country of origin is important for many reasons. Free trade agreement benefits are based on a product's country of origin. Specific to the USMCA, "domestic content" provisions determine the percentage of a product's components that can come from outside of Canada, the U.S. or Mexico and still qualify for duty-free status.

- **Product Valuation:** CBP requires shippers to identify the [value](#) of products entering the United States. In general, the value listed on a commercial invoice should be the price a buyer in the U.S. has paid for a product (and not the amount the goods will be sold for in the United States). This is called the product's transaction value, and should also reflect money paid for commissions, assists, royalties, production costs and packaging. This information should be included on the commercial invoice. Important to note, the transaction value should not include transportation or insurance costs, or any taxes paid on the item.

Failure to include the above factors, according to CBP, "is undervaluing the goods and may result in penalties." The agency also advises that all prices must be converted to U.S. dollars on invoices and other entry documents.

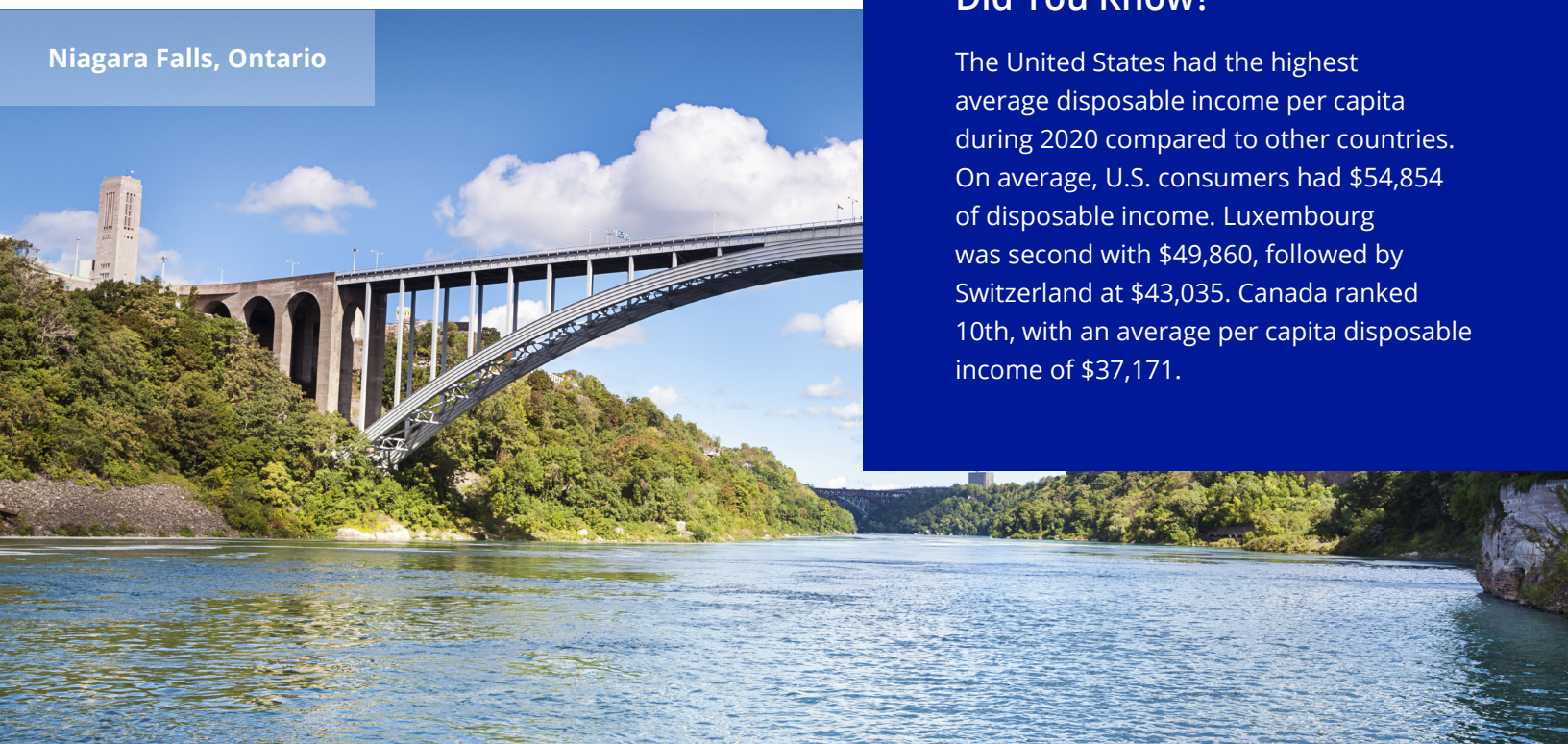
In some situations, it is not possible to assign a transaction value. In those situations, alternate processes should be used, as [carefully outlined](#) by CBP.



Did You Know?

The United States had the highest average disposable income per capita during 2020 compared to other countries. On average, U.S. consumers had \$54,854 of disposable income. Luxembourg was second with \$49,860, followed by Switzerland at \$43,035. Canada ranked 10th, with an average per capita disposable income of \$37,171.

Niagara Falls, Ontario



Avoiding Common Mistakes and Challenges

Inaccurate or incomplete documentation are the most common reasons for delays at the border. Take the time to check—and double-check—that all information is accurate and documentation is filled out properly before submitting paperwork to CBP.

- **Avoid the “Big 3.”** Most errors occur in the following categories:

- Product Valuation
- Tariff Classification
- Country of Origin

Determining the correct information can be complicated but, as detailed below, resources are available to help.

- **Improper USMCA Claims.** The [USMCA](#) provides duty-free status for qualified goods moving between the three signatory countries. But determining if a product qualifies can be tricky, and erroneous claims can delay a shipment’s entry. A shipper must consult the trade agreement’s “rules of origin,” which detail eligibility requirements for each product. A shipper should not apply for free trade benefits unless there is an absolute certainty that a shipment is eligible.
- **Recordkeeping.** Importers are required by CBP to keep all customs-related records for five years. Canada’s CBSA requires export records be kept for six years. Make sure you have a system in place for seamless records management, and that materials are easily accessible. A well-managed records management system will be very helpful should your business be subject to a CBP or CBSA audit.

- **Failure to obtain PGA permits.** Nearly 50 U.S. government departments and agencies have responsibility for the import process and establish requirements for the products under their control. These entities are called Partner Government Agencies (PGAs) and CBP acts on their behalf in enforcing all import requirements. Each shipper is responsible for determining if its products fall under the scope of any PGAs, and for complying with all requirements.

CBP expects all importers to demonstrate “reasonable care” in providing accurate and complete information about their shipments. Sometimes though, despite a shipper’s good faith efforts, mistakes happen. A shipper should immediately notify CBP about a possible error and make the necessary corrections. This can help minimize any fees or penalties that may result from the error.



Did You Know?

Shippers can ensure information accuracy by requesting an advance ruling from CBP. CBP evaluates all information provided about a particular product, and issues a binding decision with regard to tariff classification or country of origin. The advance ruling may not be disputed. Alternatively, non-binding guidance can be accessed via CBP’s [CROSS database](#), which is a searchable repository of all prior CBP rulings.




Help is Available! Resources to Facilitate Customs Compliance

As this overview of CBP requirements makes clear—customs clearance can be quite complicated, confusing, and time-consuming if you don't have the right support. But fear not, because plenty of help is available to assist in navigating the various requirements.

- **Centers of Excellence and Expertise**—CBP maintains a network of industry-specific [“Centers of Excellence and Expertise”](#) that oversee trade policy and serve as a resource for the trade community. Each center serves as a one-stop solution provider for the industry it serves. Centers are staffed by trade specialists who are experts in their fields, and who are empowered to make decisions and give direction on related import and export issues.
- **Customs Brokers**—Customs brokers provide an enormous service to commercial importers by managing the customs process on their behalf. According to CBP, there are almost 14,500 active licensed customs brokers in the United States. Important to note though, while a customs broker may submit information and payments to CBP on behalf of their clients, ultimate responsibility remains with the shipper.
- **Canadian Government Resources**—The Canadian government maintains a [detailed website](#) that includes updated and comprehensive information about the U.S. customs clearance process. [Exporting to the United States—Dealing with U.S. Customs](#), provides a basic overview of the process, and provides tips for avoiding mistakes—and costly delays.
- **Purolator Trade Assistant**—Purolator assists shippers with an online tool that helps identify a product's correct tariff classification code and corresponding tariff rate.
- **Purolator Digital Commercial Invoice**—Another tool offered by Purolator allows shippers to electronically generate and submit required commercial invoices. The Digital Commercial Invoice solution simplifies and expedites compliance with this critical customs requirement. The tool is especially helpful for businesses that ship large volumes to Canada, and need to generate—and track—multiple invoices.”



A woman with long, wavy brown hair is smiling and looking down at a tablet device she is holding. She is wearing a light blue button-down shirt under a grey blazer. The background is dark with several out-of-focus light spots. A solid green vertical bar is on the right side of the image, and a solid green horizontal bar is at the bottom.

Ensure Logistics
Efficiency—Rely on
Purolator as Your
Cross-Border Partner

Reliable Cross-Border Partnership: Count on Purolator for Seamless Operations



Did You Know?

91%

of Americans expect to receive their products within a week

9%

expecting same-day service

Once your shipments clear customs and enter the United States, what's next? How can you ensure shipments will arrive at their end destination on time, and that your U.S. customers will be satisfied with the delivery experience?

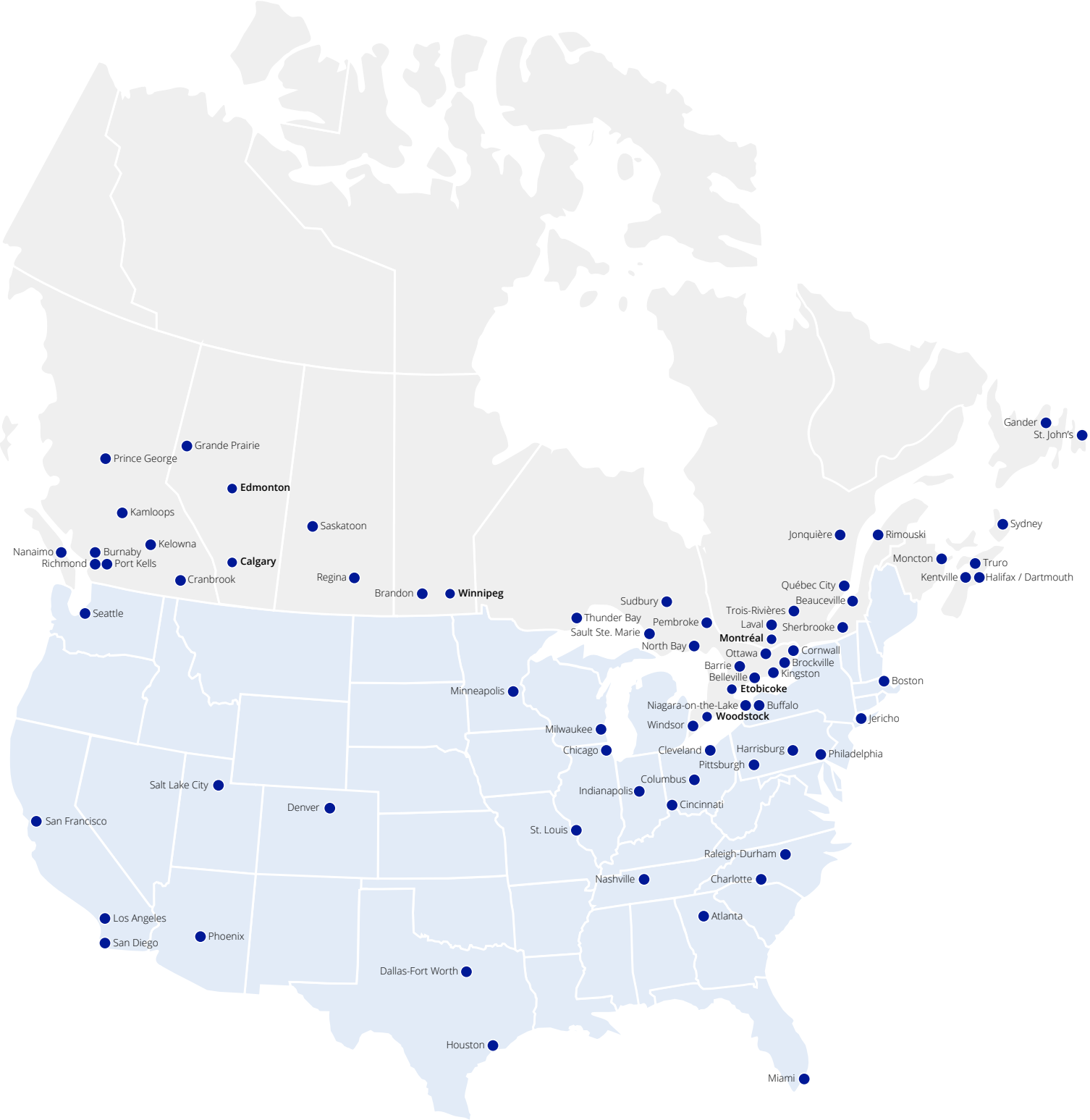
Keep in mind that 91% of Americans expect to receive their products within a week, with 9% expecting same-day service!

When thinking about [how to ship from Canada to the U.S.](#), an obvious solution is to [enlist a trusted shipping and logistics provider](#) with extensive expertise in both the U.S. and Canadian markets. This includes Purolator, which has more than 60 years of experience within Canada, and 25 years of experience managing cross-border shipments to the United States.

Purolator's extensive capabilities in the U.S. and Canadian markets mean a business can rely on Purolator for its comprehensive cross-border needs. There are many benefits to using a single provider including consistency of service, range of service options, high degrees of accountability and visibility, and [reduced risks of damage or theft](#).



Discover What Purolator Can Offer as Your Cross-Border Logistics Partner





Comprehensive service throughout Canada and fast service to the border. This is a critical capability. Purolator maintains a distribution network within Canada that services 99.9% of Canadian postal codes. This means service is available regardless of where a shipment needs to be picked up, including rural and remote regions of the country. Once in the Purolator network, shipments move seamlessly to the border.

The importance of comprehensive Canadian coverage is critically important. Most Canadian logistics companies limit service to certain geographic regions, which means a company with shipments coming from multiple provinces may need to enlist multiple providers. This extends a shipment's transit time, and can also mean a loss of efficiency and visibility. By offering coverage to all provinces and territories, Purolator ensures fast, guaranteed service to the border, and eliminates the need to enlist multiple service providers.

Purolator's freight capabilities ensure coast-to-coast service throughout the United States and Canada. This simplifies the distribution process for cross-border shipments, and ensures the highest levels of efficiency—and visibility.

- **Seamless Customs Clearance Process.** Purolator offers [brokerage services](#) to ensure seamless clearance through customs. This includes ensuring all required import information is accurate and complete, and pre-filed with CBP. Brokerage services also help shippers take advantage of applicable duty and tax incentives, including appropriate USMCA provisions, and Section 321 programs.
- **Guaranteed, On-Time Deliveries within the United States.** Once in the U.S., Purolator oversees seamless end delivery with critical capabilities that include:
 - Service to all 50 states—including Hawaii and Alaska—and the ability to provide a range of solutions.
 - Bandwidth to accommodate a wide array of shipment needs. Services include:
 - Time-specific next-day deliveries.
 - [Mission critical services](#) for most-urgent shipments.
 - Courier and freight options for “less urgent” shipments.
 - Emphasis on [last-mile delivery services](#) that meet U.S. consumers' expectations.

Opportunities Abound for Canadian Businesses—But Customs Efficiency and Logistics Excellence are Essential!

You've worked so hard to plan your entry to the U.S. market. So why risk having shipments delayed by a customs clearance mistake, or an ineffective logistics strategy? Instead, choose a logistics partner that specializes in cross-border solutions, and truly understands the customs process. Purolator has extensive capabilities in both the United States and Canada that will ensure your shipments arrive in the U.S. on time, and with the highest levels of innovation and efficiency.





Trust Purolator as a resource
for U.S. market information
and logistics expertise.

Contact us

Purolator
Promises delivered™

[purolator.com](https://www.purolator.com)