

Developing export channels for a sustainable future

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The export sector has been a rock-solid performer over the last number of difficult years — and that good news story is set to continue, according to Simon McKeever, chief executive of the Irish Exporters Association.

The out-turn for 2014 was very strong — the industry achieved total exports of €207 billion, up from €184 billion in 2013 and, says McKeever: “That is very good”, pointing out that this shows a strong performance in services area.

“We had seen the trend for services to outpace goods.”

However the value of the goods sector has risen from €92 billion to €107 billion — up 16% between 2013 and 2014, while services rose from €92 billion to €101 billion in the same period, working out as a rise of about 10%.

“Food has been a fantastic story of growth,” he said, pointing out that food and drinks exports rose about 46% between 2009 and 2014 to about €10.4 billion in 2014.

“The rate of growth in exports in the food and drink sector from 2009 to 2014 has outpaced the rate of growth in total exports — this is staggering.”

However, the exports sec-

tor continues to face a number of challenges, one of which is the need to continue opening up and penetrating new markets.

China is an area of very significant potential for Irish exports — particularly dairy and seafood products — he observes.

“China is now Ireland’s second-most important market for dairy,” declares McKeever, pointing out that in 2008 this country was our 13th most significant market — a huge improvement in just six years.

“There is great potential for dairy exports into China,” he said, adding that seafood is another potentially huge sector for increased exports.

There are basically two levels of challenge facing small Irish businesses — the challenge to scale up, and the challenge to break into markets outside Ireland.

“Bord Bia gives a lot of support in that area,” he said, adding that, in conjunction with Northern Ireland and Scotland, the IEA runs the Access 6 programme, an EU-funded initiative to support small food producers in their bid to “get their stuff onto the shelves of shops in the USA, London and the Benelux countries, for example.”

The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership offers challenges as well as opportunities to Ireland — the impact it could have on Irish beef is an issue, he points out, adding however, the deal would potentially open up huge export markets for Irish companies.

For most companies, says McKeever, the first step into the exports sector is usually the market in Great Britain.

No great surprise there — similar in terms of business culture, legal framework and language and palate, while the transport infrastructure between both countries is strong, the UK currently accounts for some 40% of Irish food and drink exports, which is as much if not more than we export to the rest of the EU.

“A lot of people think it is easy to do business in the UK,” says McKeever.

Actually, he says, there are some differences — there is less networking in the UK, he comments.

“However if you get in the door and your service stands up, you will get a chance. It is a very straight place to do business,” he says, adding that the key markets for overall food and drink exports from Ireland are Britain, the European Union, China and the US.



Simon McKeever, chief executive of the Irish Exporters Association; Dara Murphy, Minister of State; Lord Mayor of Dublin Christy Burke; and Hugh Kelly, president of the Irish Exporters Association, at the recent national export campaign at the Smart Business Show.