Interview: Eva Prada – Director, British Chamber of Commerce in Spain

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Eva Prada, director of the British Chamber of Commerce in Spain, discusses trade relations between the UK and Spain and the activities of the Chamber in developing trust-based business relationships between companies and the government, their collaboration with key institutions such as ICEX, as well as their intention to work towards developing new services and platforms for their members.

Can you provide an overview of the mission and objectives of the British Chamber of Commerce in Spain?

We are one of the centenary Chambers in Spain. We were founded in 1908 and we operate in Madrid, Barcelona and Malaga with a small footprint in the UK and the view of expanding to the Basque Country. We have around 300 member-companies, 60 percent of which are of Spanish origin and the remaining 40 are British. Our mission has three angles: we promote business relationships between Spain and the UK, we represent the interests of our members and we develop initiatives that help to bring visibility to our member companies. In terms of our activities, we organize over 60 meetings and events of different formats and with different objectives – some of them can be more business oriented or targeting relationships with the government, where our mission is to influence policy and regulation. Last but not least, we have a promotion angle – we work mainly for members and we are engaged in any activity that promotes their business. Very often our members want to conduct business activities among themselves.

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What do you identify as the main cultural differences between the Spanish and British way of doing businesses?

I do not believe there is a great number of discrepancies. Having a network of contacts in order to do business seems to be equally important in Spain and the UK. There is a very popular type of event, called ‘members seminars’ where we are putting together a panel, for them to increase their visibility and to get themselves to be known by a greater variety of audience tackling those topics that they think are of interest to all the members.

71 percent of British companies believe that Brexit will not affect their business activities in Spain, 11 percent more than last year. How will the British Chamber of Commerce help their members strengthen the relationships between the two countries, once Brexit is finalized?

Brexit has been more present in our daily agenda than we thought – especially because it came as a surprise. Uncertainty has been very big, mostly because the negotiation has been very slow up until now and the possibility of bringing light to the process has been accordingly very limited. We carried out a study with 18 other British Chambers around the world. Above us, we have the Council of British Chamber of Europe which encompasses 40+ British Chamber. We interviewed more than 100 companies in 27 roundtables. In these roundtables, the Chambers did not only have British companies in their councils but the 18 European nationalities. They thought that the bilateral relations in these countries were so important that a continuity of these relationships was necessary, although they are aware that whichever result of the negotiations is going to suffer because trade after Brexit will not be as free as it has been. Sectors like financial services and the automotive had such huge numbers that they are probably going to fight to have their own bilateral trade agreements.

Spain perceives the UK as a leader in many areas of regulations and it has always been like that. I remember that even 20 years back, Spain always looked up to the UK as the market of reference when it came to talks about regulation. In 1995, the Spanish market was liberalized, whereas in the UK it had been the case for years. I remember how back then the Spanish market needed references to other markets, where it had happened before. This has been the case in the energy sector and in financial services. Spain would look at the UK as a reference and therefore, there is much interest in these negotiations. Many companies claim that a lot of investment has been postponed because of this uncertainty. Trade and people are probably the key elements of interest to our members. Britain is also often associated with quality – and we still do not have evidence of a negative impact on the “made in Britain” brand.

Could you give us an insight into the trade relations between the two countries?

According to the 2017 edition of our Barometer of British Investment in Spain, the UK was the first EU investor in Spain and the second from the world. In the last 25 years, the UK has invested more than EUR 65 billion generating over 183 thousand jobs. The UK, conversely, is the first destination for Spanish investment. The UK is third, after Germany and France, for imports of goods and services and in 2016 Spain exported to the UK over EUR 9 billion – the main sectors being automotive vehicles, machinery, aeronautical, jewelry, pharmaceuticals, and fashion.

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How important is it for the UK Chamber of Commerce to cooperate with other investment institutions such as ICEX?

I would say it is key. We have recently developed a very ambitious institutional relations plan where we identified the key stakeholders in terms of who were they key partners for us both in Britain and in Spain. The Ambassador is our honorary president and we have a very close relationship with Invest in Spain and ICEX. The support that ICEX has given to our barometer was crucial as it is a tool to show evidence on the figures that we provide. Our role of influence if a fundamental part of our mission. We have identified in a moment of Brexit that companies value chambers of commerce that are also an independent voice of businesses.

To this purpose, we created the British investment in Spain committee, which publishes an annual Barometer. This committee was born out of the need to give value to British investment in Spain that had not been measured before. Once we identified the concerns and the barriers, we developed a number of meetings with government officials to explain to them what challenges companies are facing. Our barometer identified a number of barriers such as bureaucracy, lack of investment in innovation and lack of market unity. Based on this, we created a second committee called innovation committee. The third working group that we have is obviously on Brexit. KPMG is helping us identify what are the concerns for both Spanish and British companies in relation with Brexit.

The British Chamber celebrated 110 years in 2018. Where do you hope to see the changes in the future?

The British Chamber has recently elected a new President and governing council who are developing a new strategy for the next two years. In order to increase the sustainability of the Chamber, we are working towards developing new sources of income, new services and professionalizing some of the internal operations. Our members are the most important part of the organization. We are looking to gather more information from our members and respond better to their needs, through tools such as a new CRM. The last few years have been successful, and we will work to consolidate our position in the market.

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