

Europe

The doubts about the European Community's finances have cast a shadow over most economies in the EC, but compared with the UK some countries are still relatively buoyant.

Here are some comments I picked up as I went round - both positive and negative:



Germany

The strongest economy in the Eurozone area, it has never the less had its ups and downs with the collapse of the Karstadt department store group – as well as other retailers – last year.

In greeting cards, Uwe Brandes from Town, who is fighting for display space in the large retail groups such as Hugen Dugel and Talia, are telling me that there are signs of the largest publishers offering unbeatable terms to gain space at any cost and this is creating difficulties for distributors with, perhaps, more interesting product. This has left some uncertainty regarding

2011 as a whole at that level.

In another part of the market, distributors who sell mainly to independents are having a different experience. Peter Ulrich at Acte Tre is an example of this and told me that he had a good year in 2010, benefiting from the strengthening economy in Germany – especially as a result of the country's excellent export performance. For him it is not so much a question of price but excellence of product that appeals to his customers. He is looking forward to 2011.



Left: A typical German retailer in Wiesbaden with card spinners outside.



France

There has always been a small greeting cards market in France – card sending is just not part of the culture there. There is a postcard market however. Gilles Studnia, owner of Expressions told me that as in other countries the market is very affected by electronic media when it comes to the young.

The numbers of independent retailers have also declined (as they have in the UK) especially in shopping centres where they cannot pay the high rents. It's hoped that 2011 will not be as difficult as last year if the economy improves (unemployment is at 10%) but everyone is taking a cautious view for the moment.

Above: Deep in the bowels of the Louvre lies a secret UK card shop – Dan Brown eat your heart out...



Switzerland

I was struck by the similarity of different reports by distributors I met in Switzerland recently. There were two factors in operation. Firstly, the economy was not as strong as before, not so much because of the worldwide economy but with such high deposits of funds in Swiss banks the Swiss franc has retained much of its value so that its traditional exports have become more expensive in euro, dollar and sterling markets. This has led to a higher level of unemployment than previously. Even then it is only at 4%. Christian Barraud, managing director of C. Barraud, a leading distributor of UK greeting cards in the country, told me how retailers are diminishing in number and group buyers are driving down prices which impacts on margins (a common story everywhere) and everyone has had to work that much harder to maintain sales. However, secondly, there was a drive from consumer level to have a more added value and original product offering.



Above: Robin checking out a card spinner in Switzerland.



Holland

One of the most dynamic economies in Europe with a strong greeting card market, the Netherlands has one of the lowest unemployment on the continent, at 4.4%. As in many other countries, there was an overall reduction in volume in 2010 brought about by the worldwide economic situation. According to Peter Tijink, managing director of The Art Group Holland, those companies with the best product will win through. His policy is to buy 'good British product' as well as doing a little of his own publishing and he is experiencing growth in 2011. One point to be aware of, however, is that the Dutch consumer will not pay over the odds for a card – or anything else for that matter, and when I was there recently I was struck by the low prices of cards in the shops. Dutch distributors will therefore always want to drive a hard bargain when it comes to buying.

Below: A well-known Dutch bookshop in South Amsterdam that sells many UK cards.



Finland

Like Norway, Finland has not been as badly affected as the UK at the economic level.

Eija Watia, director of card publisher/distributor Karto said that 2010 was a good year for the company and Christmas was good too. The only downside has been in the area of corporate Christmas cards where, like in the UK, companies are going over to electronic media in order to save money. Retailers, however, are still buying good quantities of cards and Eija foresees a healthy market in 2011.

However, this depends on the company's ability to offer new concepts and ideas. They will be coming to the UK to find them!