

Gumshoe's Intuition: Spotting Counterfeits At Port of Antwerp

**Low-Tech Belgian Inspector
Has Many Good Catches;
He Knows Smell of Chanel**

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ANTWERP, Belgium -- From his perch at the North Sea port of Antwerp, Chris De Buyscher can look at thousands of 40-foot container units and pick out those most likely to contain fake Nikes, Marlboros or Dior jackets.

When he's off work, the 51-year-old Belgian can spot a knockoff Louis Vuitton bag from across a crowded, smoke-filled room.

Mr. De Buyscher is widely regarded among his peers as the best counterfeit-goods inspector in the world. "He's a genius, plain and simple," says Christophe Zimmermann, director of the anticounterfeiting unit at the World Customs Organization, an intergovernmental voluntary association that coordinates among the world's 170 customs agencies.

The global boom in counterfeit goods has Mr. De Buyscher very busy. In the past two years, tiny Belgium has seized about 40 million counterfeit items, the most taken by any nation in the European Union. And about 90% of the Belgian seizures came from Mr. De Buyscher's three-person team policing the 22 miles of Antwerp docks.

Mr. De Buyscher is the main attraction of a WCO training program. He has made presentations in the Philippines, Morocco, Senegal, China, Croatia, Hungary and Algeria. Next year, he plans trips to Japan and Mexico. "In the morning, we give theoretical classes," says Mr. Zimmermann. "In the afternoon, Chris shows what he can do."

His skills are a low-tech blend of old-fashioned gumshoe detective work and intuition. On a recent trip to Algeria, Mr. De Buyscher singled out a shipping container from China for checking at the port of Oran. It was supposed to contain shoes -- and it did -- fake Nikes.

On the road, he and Mr. Zimmermann spend evenings and nights out, indulging in their favorite spectator sport: spotting counterfeit goods in restaurants and bars. What was fake in Algeria? "Absolutely everything," says Mr. De Buyscher. "People in Africa want Dolce & Gabbana, too."

Antwerp recruited Mr. De Buyscher to its new counterfeit-goods team a dozen years ago. Almost everything in international commerce is shipped in 20-foot to 40-foot units, containers that can be easily transferred within ports, then mounted on ship, truck or train. The challenge is to find out which ones hide counterfeits. The first years were hard. Mr. De Buyscher seized only 15 to 20 containers. This year, he's at 106 -- and counting.

At a time when ports are hiring mathematicians to do sophisticated risk analysis and installing programs and X-ray machines to keep up with the tsunami of knockoffs, Mr. De Buyscher is old school. He relentlessly checks thousands of bills of lading for subtle slip-ups. The problem with computers, he says, is that counterfeiters are always a step ahead. "They're working on giving me a computer program to work with," he says. "I don't need it." In other ports, computers do this work. Operators plug in data such as origin, type of good and shipping lane, and use an algorithm to calculate the likelihood that a box will contain counterfeit goods. Customs officers don't necessarily read the bills of lading with their own eyes.

SUSPICIOUS TRADE

Every day, Antwerp customs agent Chris De Buyscher carefully checks hundreds of bills of handling. He looks for telltale clues -- like misspellings, unknown recipients or "prepaid freight," a common smugglers's gambit -- to determine whether a container box is worth opening or not. [See sample bills.](#)¹

His office and home are museums displaying choice counterfeit junk. It's a hobby many customs agents have. Recent catches include a Frosted Flakes mug, fake vodka labels and a Chinese Angelina Jolie doll from one of her "Tomb Raider" movies.

Part of his expertise comes from knowing brand-name goods. He visits outlet malls to study the products of Nike and Oscar de la Renta. He knows how things are packed in certain countries. Boxes from India, for instance, usually have red rims. "If one of those says 'Made in USA,' there's a problem," he says.

He's also up on fashion and can recognize 10 perfumes by nose alone, he says. "Chanel, Dior and Yves Saint Laurent smells are

trademarked, just like the bottles they're in."

A container billed as dark tea from Ningbo, China, that had passed through Singapore recently raised several flags. "Boats from China usually go through Hong Kong," he says. "Also, everybody knows the Indians make dark tea and the Chinese make green tea." Inside were nine million fake Marlboros.

Roughly half the container boxes that Mr. De Buyscher opens contain fakes. "An astonishing ratio," says Mr. Zimmermann. An inspector needs to have a high batting average because there are so many boxes coming through and nobody could check them all. The port of Antwerp usually takes in more than 15,000 containers a day. Customs officials have the resources to check less than 0.5% of them. Opening and unloading a container can cost up to \$3,000 in labor and other costs.

Fatalistic customs officials admit that despite their efforts, a lot of counterfeit goods get through. "We're overwhelmed," says Mr. De Buyscher. Playing the odds, Antwerp anticounterfeit agents don't bother to check boats coming from North America.

The need for Mr. De Buyscher's skills is growing. There are 400 million container boxes in the world, and the number is growing by 9% a year. The growth of the \$500 billion counterfeit goods industry is one of the biggest economic challenges facing European and American companies as they relocate production to Asia. "This is nothing short of an economic crisis," says EU trade commissioner Peter Mandelson.

China, the source of almost two-thirds of all counterfeit goods seized in the EU, has agreed to crack down on counterfeiters. But WCO officials say progress is slow. Pirates are branching out beyond shirts and CDs to cargo such as auto parts and prescription drugs. "Losing the battle against counterfeit goods could cost human lives," says Michel Danet, secretary-general of the WCO.

One afternoon recently, Mr. De Buyscher read the paperwork for a box on the 2,500-container ship Wan

Hai 312 that was labeled "women's coat." Several elements raised a bushy eyebrow. First, all freight was prepaid, a common smugglers' move to get goods through a port quickly. The bill of lading didn't include a brand name, nor did it contain an official port of origin number in the top right-hand corner.

He ordered the box impounded. The next day, he received a panicked fax from the importer, a Chinese man in Paris. "There has been a mistake, please ship back to China," he wrote.

Mr. De Buysscher didn't do that. When he opened the box, he took out a jacket and read the label. It said "Ice-Dior." He pulled the fake fur off the hood. "Dior wouldn't make this," he sniffed.

Mr. De Buysscher called Daniel De Jaeger, a Brussels lawyer who handles hundreds of cases a year for Dior. Mr. De Jaeger filed a complaint with Belgian customs to prevent delivery of the shipment. Dior pays to destroy counterfeit goods, at a cost of between \$6,600 and \$13,200 a year. "We can't go to China to catch counterfeiters," says Mr. De Jaeger, "so we have to get them when they cross our borders."