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First steps in international marketing

The internet has enabled any business to sell internationally. But taking that first step can be daunting.

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Direct access to overseas purchasers has delivered the means for smaller companies to prosper from international trade like never before. But as more and more companies get involved, buyers are becoming more discerning, and the competition more aggressive. In response, you need to up your marketing game. But more than that, to achieve success in reaching out to potential buyers in new and unfamiliar territories, you'll need to be keenly aware of how their market differs from your own, their expectations and the potential stumbling blocks to effective communication.

Business depends on effective communication to be able to thrive. Naturally, language is an important element in the communication process but it is by no means the only one. Of equal importance to what you say, is how you say it – the way that you express or emphasise certain ideas about your company, your products and the way you do business can have a crucial impact on whether your message is well received or trashed out of hand.

The first step is to make sure you really understand your market, and more importantly, the needs of the potential customers you are talking to. For example, is it a price-sensitive market where the most important consideration is cost? Or is quality or good service the key factor in purchase decisions? Don't assume that an overseas market will have the same priorities and needs as your domestic one. A fashion item might sell well in Europe because it's cheap; the same item might be popular in Asia because its European style differentiates it from locally-produced competitors.

Approaching your market for the first time, you need to come across as credible and trustworthy. Nothing destroys that impression faster than poorly-written or ill-conceived communications. Be aware of the cultural sensitivities of your target audience; language which might come across in your own culture as friendly and affable might well be considered highly inappropriate in your target region. First time visitors to the UK from Japan are frequently shocked by the over-

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International business is now within the grasp of every enterprise. With an open mind and careful planning, the opportunities for growth are limitless.



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familiarity of shop assistants; likewise visitors to Japan are often bewildered by the extreme courtesy they receive in shops and restaurants. For this reason, it's vital to ensure the language of your initial pitch expresses your ideas clearly and appropriately. If you have any doubt, use a professional translator.

The method of delivery is also important. Email is a cheap and effective way of reaching a large audience, but used indiscriminately it becomes hugely damaging to your reputation as a trustworthy supplier. Do not be tempted to conduct spam campaigns - particularly if you are approaching European or US markets. Spam is universally loathed and you will do your reputation far more damage than good by using it.

It is important to realise that in a market where you have no existing presence, the only information a potential customer has about you is what you send them or what they can find out online. Reputation and a clear statement of business ethics are therefore essential marketing assets which must be expressed throughout the whole of your corporate communications strategy - not just your sales pitch.

Business today is a global affair. The opportunities for even small companies are boundless. By adapting to the new global business culture; learning to speak its language, its customs and to communicate well, even modest enterprises can enjoy unprecedented international sales success.

Key Points

- **Understand your market.** Make sure you consider cultural as well as commercial factors when planning your approach.
- **Pitch it right:** Don't make the mistake of assuming your approach will be understood in the way it was intended.
- **Don't skimp on your marcomms:** Spend money on good quality translation and don't be tempted to cut corners with trashy marketing.
- **Express your brand values:** Make sure potential customers have the opportunity to truly understand what your business is about.