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How to market to Americans: Advice from a US business and marketing expert



Despite the similarities in language and culture between the UK and USA, each year many UK companies make the foray into the US market but soon return home empty handed. Simply paying attention to the fundamental cultural and structural differences between the two nations can save large amounts of time and money.

One way to help you define your best route to US markets is by first defining your own objectives for such a significant undertaking. These might be objectives for profit levels, types of contract, human resource levels and calibre of your degree of control over the US operation, among others.

Your opportunities as a British professional and business are many, with the advantage that Americans hold the quality of British goods and services in very high regard. Ways to make sure you stay ahead and further your success in the States include:

- Use your website and SEO techniques to help US customers and suppliers contact you easily, without the associated costs of trans-Atlantic phone charges. Know that Americans turn first to your website for information about your organisation.
- Offer local product or service support and information.
- Focus on the history or story behind your brand, company, product and/or service to attract target customers.
- Utilise the heritage and perception in the US of Britain as a world leader in highly-designed/engineered products, services, luxury goods and intellectual property (film, TV, music, leisure concepts).
- Help your US business partners better understand their own EU markets.

If you're wondering how to start making the most of your American commercial opportunities, consider the following:

1. Geography - Focus is everything.

There are six time zones across the 50 States, with very large distances between the country's major cities, which means it is critical to plan your meetings with great care. With Los Angeles and New York separated by a 5-hour flight, and traffic within cities increasingly an issue for frustrated commuters, it is not unusual for meetings to be held virtually. Of the 327 million inhabitants, the 5 most populous states in 2018 – California, Texas, Florida, New York and



Pennsylvania – account for 37% of the total. Thus, being focused is the name of the game. It helps to know that California is the size of the French economy, while Texas' is the size of Brazil. At a city level, San Francisco, Oakland and Hayward in California are collectively about the equivalent size of the Belgian economy.

2. Language – Say what you mean and mean what you say.

While George Bernard Shaw observed the US and UK as “two nations divided by a common language,” this plays out when the subtleties of the high-context British English language are lost on the “what you hear is what you get” American perception. The US version has evolved over the last three centuries to be a functional tool that can absorb the millions of immigrants who arrived without its knowledge, needing to perform on-the-job quickly to successfully build the country. Assuming common British words are in the language will land you in the deep end, including fortnight, bespoke and turnover.

3. Culture – eats strategy for breakfast.

The clock is king

Be on time for meetings. Respect that Americans need to maintain a schedule. Deadlines are serious. Meet delivery and completion times or risk losing business.

You look wonderful, darling

Packaging is important for people, products and presentations. Neatness and attention to details are important. Are your shoes polished? The distinction between ‘looking wonderful’ and ‘business appropriate attire’ is often unclear. Avoid wearing casual clothes to a company with formal dress. Do as the Americans - before you go, simply ask: “What’s the dress code today?”

Hi there, glad to meet you, what’s the bottom line?

Be prepared to quickly provide specific information about your products including pricing. Arrange your material, your story, and facts in simple formats. Can you distil your presentation into a one page Executive Summary?

Business before pleasure

Be willing to do business first, build the relationship second. Americans develop relationships through doing business. If they don’t take time to get to know you, remember no insult is intended – they just are keeping to a schedule.

Make it my way

Americans want choices, to have their opinions recognised. Be sure to involve people in a decision. Provide choices in your product so consumers believe you recognise their needs.

Guides are good

Americans use outside advisers as a regular part of their business lives. If lawyers or consultants are included in meetings, do not be offended or anxious. They routinely act as advisors to be sure that issues are addressed to avoid future problems.

Plan, plan, plan

Don’t be surprised when you’re asked to describe your market entry plan, your training plan, or your plan to increase revenue or where you plan to go on vacation. The assumption is always that you will have a plan, because without one, you might not reach your goals.

Do it now!

Even with the emphasis on planning described above, Americans still may make decisions seemingly on impulse. In their rush to ‘get things done’ they generally try to decide quickly and worry about the consequences later.

So remember, to succeed with Americans requires you to have a plan they can be part of, be ready to do deals their way, and get things done quickly.

4. Top tips – know before you go.

So how have UK companies like yours achieved success in the United States?

Carefully. Because of the massive size of US markets, successful companies tend to do their homework well in advance in order to avoid blunders and embarrassment. Similarly, successful UK companies take care in choosing their marketing partners abroad, assessing their business philosophies, gracefulness, reputations and deftness in managing the market.

Methodically. By carving up this vast geographic market in order to target (and thus manage) a series of smaller ones, or segments, many small and medium-sized companies coming into the US can focus on using their resources to best effect. It’s much easier to digest in smaller bites than one large one.

You might consider defining your segments in a number of ways:

- By the products/services you wish to market
- By the different mix of benefits sought by each distinct group of customers
- By where your product/service is available for purchase
- By the time of year your product/service is available (if it’s seasonal)
- By the method of payment (standing order vs. credit card vs. retainer etc)
- By industry sector
- By customer size or type (industry sector, number of employees, turnover, number of offices)
- By consumption patterns (heavy user/light user)
- By geography, by targeting certain states that are most relevant for your offering.

Each segment can then be prioritised and treated as a distinct market (for your marketing and sales budget are finite), at which your pricing strategy, product mix, promotions and points of distribution can be aimed in a logical way – in line with the benefits each such market expects from your product/service.

Indigenously. Many UK firms enjoy the benefit of hiring American marketing expertise in America – whether in the form of management consultants or hired management. Generally, this is a more common way forward than it is for US firms expanding into the UK and hiring UK managers for key positions. The advantages of having knowledge of US business practices and customs, social and professional ‘networks’ and marketing practices are increasingly recognised as a valuable asset to the budding UK company in the States.

Strategically. UK firms also often use the US as a stepping-stone for Southeast Asian markets, or as an export base generally for other parts of the world (e.g. Miami as the gateway to South America). UK manufacturing companies who have made their way into US markets are now consolidating and working smarter with fewer people.

5. Regulation – do your homework.

While the topic of tariffs/regulation are identified in the Export Ready report as a barrier for businesses, how does this translate to the US market? While GDPR applies to US companies doing business in the EU, there is not yet similar data privacy legislation at Federal level. But it is coming, as Congress increasingly scrutinises social media owners, their advertising algorithms and the use of personal data since the Facebook/Cambridge Analytica events. Best practice is to check with your local US marketing agency(ies) or the American Marketing Association to see what is required for any marketing lists you rent and/or develop in-house.

6. Skills – find local knowledge.

While finding the right marketing skills is identified in the Export Ready report as a barrier for businesses, finding and using local US marketing advice and expertise on the ground will decide your fate. CIM qualifications are recognised worldwide and there are degree qualifications at University level where one can study international marketing. Local expertise will be able to identify what localisations will be required for your product or service including your brand colours, brand name(s), pack sizes, ingredients listings and US customer service expectations responsiveness.

Case study:

“If I’d known then what I know now, it would all have been different.”

As Bill described his British innovation – a flame-proof lid for armoured tanks that let troops escape unhurt – during his pitch to the Department of Defence procurement team in Washington DC, he noticed the change of mood after joking, “Well of course it’s not totally flame-proof – nothing is!”

The meeting was quickly concluded by these potential buyers, with Bill wondering what went wrong. Was it the self-deprecating remark made in the moment? Was it the audience lacked a sense of humour? Was it the literal nature of American English?

The lesson? In fact, it was all of the above. The expectation of Bill was to show confidence in himself, in his product and in his company.

Final thoughts

Yes, America is competitive but as Frank Sinatra once sang about New York: “if you can make it here you can make it anywhere”, much is the same in business. The United States offers huge opportunity, it is the largest, most competitive and technologically advanced economy in the world. For UK entrepreneurs and SMEs, it represents a real opportunity for business growth and development as the country has low regulatory barriers and developed global supply chains, which can be tapped into, to export into other markets.

The country’s economy continues to grow offering new opportunities for businesses around the world. While its strong service culture drives new innovations and services on a weekly basis. Today, the US is the UK’s biggest single destination for exports, when you consider all the above factors it’s easy to understand, and why it should be a key consideration for UK businesses thinking of exporting.



About the author:

Allyson Stewart-Allen is a renowned advisor, author, speaker and educator whose expertise in brand internationalisation is sought by leading businesses globally. A Californian based in Europe for over 25 years, Allyson applies her extensive international consulting experience, MBA education with Dr Peter Drucker and languages (French, German) to the company she founded, International Marketing Partners.

Allyson has advised more than 200 businesses in 26 countries including Aegis, BAE Systems, Burberry, Cadbury, Coach, HSBC, Lufthansa, NBC Universal, SAB Miller and Shell. She is co-author of best-selling book *Working with Americans* and CIM Trustee.