



Winning in America

How to do business with Uncle Sam

Writing Allyson Stewart-Allen

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Ever since the UK voted to leave the EU in 2016, many business leaders have wondered about what shape a UK-US trade agreement would take. Another question they might have today is whether they should bother investing any energy in growing their US market when they are grappling with the disruptive effects of Covid-19 on their businesses.

The nature of a UK-US trade agreement will be determined by the trade talks between these two economies, which highly depend on the cultural preferences of both. On the latter issue, having an intentional and dedicated focus on both long- and short-term market opportunities is essential for sustaining your organisation's viability.

We know that reaching a successful transatlantic trade agreement will be about more than simply economics. It will also be about the

personalities of the negotiators. Boris Johnson and his team must understand the cultural intricacies of deal-making with Americans.

Cultural differences

The UK and the US share a common language and are said to share a ‘special relationship’. But don’t be fooled into thinking the cultural differences between the two countries are few and far between. In fact, they are much more significant than most executives realise – from communication to the pace at which business is conducted, and everything in between.

So, what do you, and the British trade negotiators, need to know about working with Americans?

I am a regular international speaker, educator and adviser on brand internationalisation – as well as a Californian who has lived in London for the last 31 years. Breaking into America is one of the most common challenges for the companies I advise. Many of these companies have difficulties building profitable relationships with their US counterparts, alongside growth strategies that won’t easily take root there.

They recognise it’s not simply ‘business as usual’ when they work in the US. Hence, they must adapt their approaches to communicating, influencing and negotiating in order to make real headway.

Here are a few other insights for business professionals to consider when looking to succeed in the world’s largest economy.

1 Transactions first, relationships second

US negotiators and business leaders value speed. This is because the country’s business culture rewards those that are first, even if they’re not necessarily the best. As everyone in the US knows, ‘the early bird gets the worm’. So those that can ‘do the deal’ are held in high esteem, often more than those who build deep, engaging personal relationships. Relationships, of course, require an investment of time – something in short supply in the US business culture.

2 Keep it simple and measurable

Americans believe ‘what you see is what you get’, so hidden meanings, irony and implicit or indirect communication will cause delays, misunderstandings and a loss of trust. Britishisms such as ‘quite’ or ‘rather’ sound tentative and indecisive to a US ear. Your negotiations will be more successful if you can articulate affirmative, confident and quantifiable ways in which your US counterpart ‘wins’. The more explicit and direct (and, of course, diplomatic) your approach, the more interest and attention you’ll receive.

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3 Evolve or die

Darwinism is effectively the US national religion. If an agreement is not being improved, but is held up by the reviews of its shortcomings, then Americans will lose interest and move on to other priorities. Given the country’s noisy backdrop, it is critically important to keep the attention of US decision-makers.

4 There’s no promotion like self-promotion

To cut through that noisy backdrop, Americans are taught from a young age that the ‘humble brag’ is one of the best ways to let others know about your achievements.

Much like any competitive marketplace, unless you are seen as better or different than others, you will be lost in the crowd. It’s customary for us to introduce ourselves by highlighting our recent achievements, awards, latest press coverage, job promotion or other indicator of professional success. We use these proxy measures to help you decide more quickly that we are reputable and trustworthy, and to entice you to transact with us and not our competitor.

5 Customise, not bespoke

US business executives like to know that you have configured your solution just for them. They want the menu to be designed with them in mind, even if it’s the same menu you offer all your customers and clients. While standardisation is what helped make American business such a significant and frequently imitated powerhouse (thank you, Henry Ford), its economy of abundance means we like to feel invested in the product or service. The more we have a hand in designing it, the more committed we become.

Closing thoughts

While the UK media brands the US as ‘a graveyard of British brands,’ there are in fact many British companies that have been extremely successful there. They have removed the element of chance by mastering the country’s rules and values. With so much fantastic creative and business talent in Britain, the US offers vast rewards for those who get it right. All it takes is some time and effort – much like you’d approach an expansion to China.

Americans are open to new commercial ideas, regardless of their country of origin. There has never been a better time to stake your claim in the US than now. ■

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