

Export experts: how British companies stand out from the crowd

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The National Business Awards celebrate excellence and innovation. Here, judge Allyson Stewart-Allen, an export specialist, describes the qualities that make British firms leaders of the pack

August 9 2018, 12:01am



BBC television presenter Naga Munchetty with star guest Mo Farah at last year's National Business Awards ceremony

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Lloyds Bank National Business Awards, now in its 16th year, celebrates the achievements of the UK's very best companies. The aim is to reward successful and ambitious British firms across all sectors, whether they are established SMEs, thriving entrepreneurs or even promising start-ups.

Allyson Stewart-Allen, the founder and chief executive of International Marketing Partners, will be judging the Exporter of the Year category, which recognises businesses that have achieved the highest and most sustainable levels of international growth.

“What do I look for in a winner? A good track record of growth as well as what adaptations have been made to its structure, products and services,” Stewart-Allen says. “The diversity of this year's entrants also shows that there's no set model that works; size or industry shouldn't be a barrier to export.”

She also acknowledges the difficulties presented by Brexit. “It's going to make business in continental Europe more complex and has created lots of uncertainty,” she says. “So why wait for clarity, which you might never get, when you can master your own destiny now and take control?”

She is quick to point out that the companies on the shortlist for this year's Exporter of the Year award have done just that. Each



Allyson Stewart-Allen

Over the past three decades, Stewart-Allen has helped more than 200 companies, including Burberry, Cadbury and HSBC, reach a global market. “It’s no longer viable just to think of business as a domestic issue. If you’re not looking at it from a global perspective, and evolving and innovating, you probably won’t survive,” she says.

That is no mean feat, she admits. “Part of the challenge is internationalising thinking and leadership. Without that, businesses will never be sustainably successful overseas.”

It can be a steep learning curve but the benefits are abundant. Last year alone, the UK exported £345.3 billion worth of goods, a rise of 14 per cent on 2016. And while exporting your product or service does not guarantee a bumper payday, it can have a huge impact by generating growth and future-proofing a business.

“There are so many gains, not just financial ones,” says Stewart-Allen. “It opens doors to new business opportunities and what you learn about an overseas market can really positively impact on what you do at home.”

The benefits might be apparent but, in reality, how easy is it to establish international trade? Stewart-Allen admits that it is far from foolproof. Even the biggest names are not guaranteed success. Notable examples include Tesco and Mark & Spencer, both of which foundered in their attempts to break into the US market, despite dominating the UK high street.

Many established companies go wrong simply by not doing their homework, believes Stewart-Allen. “There are no shortcuts. Go to new markets and watch how your potential customers and clients behave. Then come home and get your team on board. And be prepared to change.”

Stewart-Allen is looking forward to the awards ceremony on 13 November and the chance to recognise and reward the best of British exporters.

“The category really reflects the brilliance and diversity of the UK business landscape,” she says. “The creativity and innovation found in this country mean that it punches way above its weight on the global stage. That’s something that should be celebrated by all of us, and these awards ensure that happens.”

For more information, visit nationalbusinessawards.co.uk
