

From local to global: getting started with international e-commerce

By [Melissa Burns](#)

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Other than those specifically targeted at narrow niche markets, most domestic businesses do hope to one day extend their reach and go international.



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Once you have created a loyal local customer base, it may seem like a natural next step. However, global companies face many challenges completely unfamiliar to local businesses. If the expansion attempt is poorly thought-through, it can end poorly, endangering the very existence of your enterprise.

So what should you do to increase your chances of success? Let's take a look at a few things to consider.

Find the right team and partners

Expanding into a foreign market on your own, with your current resources, is possible. But only if you are lucky, if you already have experience working in the target country, and if you have money to spare. Yes, that's a lot of "ifs."

You can make success much more likely and straightforward if you find the right people to hire and collaborate with. [Partners](#) are particularly important. You want someone with experience working in the target market and preferably additional businesses and contacts whom your "territory partner" can leverage for shared resources.

For example, "By choosing a fulfillment partner with a warehouse location close to your target country, you can even ship your orders faster in that country, says [Floship's Christopher Moore](#). "This, in turn, means you can compete more favourably with local retailers."

Make sure that your new business region's staff and service providers consist of people you fully trust and who are genuinely interested in your business and the product you sell.



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Leverage the power of SEO

Even if you use paid advertising locally, after you go global, it becomes way too expensive to cover all the markets you are present in. Moreover, customers these days are increasingly jaded and suspicious towards paid ads, and many of them habitually ignore anything that has an air of promotion about it.

That is why when you deal with the international market, organic traffic is your best friend. With the right tools, it can be much more efficient than you are used to. For example, Australian shaving supplies brand [The Stray Whisker](#) achieved more than [impressive growth](#) after going international using nothing but built-in search engine optimisation by BigCommerce.

“We’ve optimised our site for brand searches,” founder Con Kazantzidis recently explained in a case study. “By spending time on the back end, we are increasingly high up on search engine results for the products we carry.”

These onsite optimisations resulted in 364% revenue growth and a 390% increase in total orders. If an out-of-the-box solution provides such results, ask yourself what can be achieved after a little tinkering and using [enterprise-grade SEO tools](#).

Prepare to pivot and educate

It may sound obvious, but make sure you understand what you are getting yourself into. If your local customers have enthusiastically adopted the idea behind your product, it doesn’t mean that the customers in your target country are going to do the same.

You may discover that what is considered natural and habitual locally can either be mostly unknown in the country you want to expand to or isn’t accepted in the mainstream. If customers in the target market are largely unfamiliar with what you have to offer, you have to be ready to spend significant resources on consumer education, without a guarantee of success. This is something that most small businesses won’t be able to do.

Before expanding, you have to consider such things as time zones, language barriers and cultural differences, because failing to do so can lead to unexpected and sometimes very unpleasant consequences.

Different countries have dramatically different cultural norms, and you have to maintain a balance between being consistent in your branding and [adapting to the environment](#) to avoid doing something offensive or inappropriate. Depending on the

situation, you will have to tweak your sales approach, branding or even the entire product.



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Do due diligence and localise everything

When making major business decisions that can severely impact your entire company, it pays to think through all potential scenarios and check everything that can go wrong. If you intend to work in a different country, you have to know enough about local tax codes and compliance issues to be sure you aren't going to break any laws, and that meeting local requirements isn't going to eliminate your profit margins.

English may be the language of international business and communication, but in e-commerce, you are going to deal with regular people, not entrepreneurs, and many of them may not speak English at all. That is why [localising your storefront](#) to territory-specific languages, currencies, measurement standards and so on is both good form and good business practice.

If you have a set of payment methods that work perfectly in your country, for example, it doesn't mean that they are going to perform equally well wherever you go. Every country has its own preferred payment options, some of which you may have never heard of.

"In Brazil, clients are not happy about using Paypal and Google Wallet, as it makes them go to another page to finish the purchase," notes [VTEX's Rafael Campos](#). There, "65% of all payments are made by credit cards with monthly installments (opting for as many installments as possible). Promotional offers and coupons are very popular and work as a great incentive, so it is important to ensure that your e-commerce site provides good offers."

The lesson is simple. Do your research, find out what users like out there, and set these options up.

Spread those wings

Now that you know all this, we hope you will be able to make your first steps in international e-commerce successfully!

ABOUT MELISSA BURNS

Melissa Burns is an independent journalist and business consultant. Business innovations, technology, and marketing are central topics of her articles. She started writing with a single goal of sharing her expertise with other people. Burns also provides workshops for start-ups and small businesses.

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