

## **Avoid mistakes that can cause a world of woe.**

By Sharon L. Badenhop, Ph.D.

If you are considering expanding your products or services to an overseas market, knowing what **not** to do can save you a lot of money. Do not be ashamed to acknowledge that you were on the path to committing unspeakable errors in your attempt to capitalize on the export market, because the big guys do it, too. But, they have a lot more money to waste in learning from their mistakes. Small businesses that fail to do their homework before taking the plunge into overseas markets may find the time and money necessary for learning-as-they-go will be crippling to their business in the country.

Here are some tips to find a right way. Consider the following common mistakes, nine hazards, that could capsized your voyage beyond USA (or other) borders before you venture into unknown territory.

**9. Viewing time as money.** This is a concept largely unique to American culture. In Arab, Latin American and Asian countries, people operate at a much different pace and do not necessarily recognize a correlation between time and money. Taking a little more time does **not** constitute a loss - it allows you to get to know the company and players better. The time creates opportunities for the relationship building process, which in other countries replaces the American signed contract. If you think you can achieve objectives in two to three days, plan on a week to 10 days. If two trips ought to close the deal, expect to schedule more.

**8. Neglecting to gain a clear picture of with whom you are meeting.** They will expect you to know about their company and the particular people involved in the discussion/negotiation process. Do not think for a minute that research has not preceded you. They will know more about you than you think. Help prospects and foster good relationships by coming to the meeting prepared with an organizational chart of the people who make up your organization. Request the same from them.

**7. Assuming that cold calls (or cold letters) will work.** In most countries, prospects will not respond unless you have been introduced to them by a third party, one whom they know, trust and have worked with before.

**6. Attending a meeting, particularly in Asian countries, alone.** Overseas businesspeople like to think of business as developing a relationship with "the company". Consequently, successful business deals are more easily secured when several company members are involved in negotiation phases. In addition, Asians are accustomed to operating with "teams" of individuals who have specific duties. If you are the only attendee, it is difficult to explain where your observer, note taker, negotiator and other key players are - not to mention accomplishing their tasks.

**5. Not doing your homework before attempting to enter the market.** This includes knowing what kind of relationship you would like to create abroad. Are you looking for a representative, an agent or a joint venture? Be prepared to know what these different arrangements mean for your company.

**4. Failing to create a plan that details what you are willing to provide your overseas colleagues.** Inevitably, you will be expected to provide support and/or bestow knowledge. Are you prepared to relinquish technology? Provide customer support for overseas sales? These and other questions need to be addressed on dry land, long before meetings are scheduled. Do not solve problem, anticipate them!

**3. Overlooking the strategic plan that considers space and living differences relative to the size, style or technology associated with your product.** Before investing money into translation and other preparatory relations material, make sure plates fit into their cupboards.

**2. Botching business negotiations by rushing to schedule meetings upon your arrival, thinking it is cost-effective.** Instead, plan on spending some time in your hotel after the plane arrives. Contact and reconfirm scheduled appointments. Review the agenda. Get a good night's sleep. Plan on attending the meeting prepared, well rested, and with a clear head.

**1. And finally, the No. 1 business faux pas in forging overseas business relationships: believing that English is the universal language.** Just because it is the language of commerce does not make it the language of choice in other countries. To demonstrate an appreciation for business, cultural and verbal differences in other markets, a business need not spend a lot of money. Try printing business cards on two sides, one in the language of your desired partner(s); providing brief and simple product information in a native tongue; and translating pertinent materials. This is also cost-effective as this effort "moves" the other person closer to an understanding and, thereby, perhaps closer to a commitment. Be ready to hire a translator for meetings. Trying to become fluent in a foreign language to achieve business objectives is unrealistic and a waste of money.

If you own or manage a business venturing into foreign markets, you do not have to reinvent the wheel. Learning from others' mistakes is a good start to reinventing your international strategic plans.

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