

IDENTIFYING AND OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF INTERNATIONAL MARKETING

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It amazes me that companies of all sizes are competing globally today. Amongst our clients are \$10 million software companies forming channel partnerships in India, \$100 million manufacturers with specific marketing plans for seven different European countries, and another whose president wrote a book on how China is reshaping global business realities.

It's no longer just the big conglomerates that are multi-national; it's you too. As a marketer, you have access to the same Internet, the same media, and the same prospects as they do. But do you have access to all of the same technology, people and resources? Doubtful. That's what our B2B Marketing Roundtable participants discussed in January, and what you're tackling today. This article will share some of the key issues and takeaways of senior marketing professionals at local B2B technology companies.

After synthesizing the discussion and comments from the Roundtable, I saw a trend emerge. All of the issues could be summarized as a struggle between Corporate Control and In-Country Implementation. This is akin to the ongoing struggle between Marketers in their "ivory tower" and Sales people "down in the trenches"; the classic struggle of Strategy vs. Execution.

In essence, the fundamental issue you face is trying to be relevant in a world that has different values in different places. How do you stay relevant and control your brand at the same time? If you favor relevancy over control, you're allowing your international brand to grow without control. If you try to control your brand so much that it stifles your in-country sales/marketing organization, you aren't going to gain much traction.

The truth? You've got to do both. You've got to have control, but let the horses run a little. You've got to make your brand stand for something, but know what is relevant locally and promote it. You've got to let your partners take control on the ground as you set strategies from afar. That's the only way you're going to win this battle. Take a look at the core international marketing issues below and see if you can frame your challenges into one or more of these categories. There are no pat answers, but understanding the issues may help you discover and direct the appropriate brand and marketing strategies. Good luck!

Corporate Control Vs. In-country Implementation

Below are four examples of the core international marketing issue – corporate control vs. in-country implementation.

Brand Vs. Point Solution

Issue:

How do you create a consistent brand that provides awareness and future value, while promoting appropriate solutions at the regional / market level?

Resolution:

This is a core issue for a marketing group: achieving the balance between supporting international business goals and sales objectives.

Companies with multiple products or solutions may have a stronger brand portfolio, but are often at a disadvantage globally because they may be competing against a strong local competitor that is offering only a point solution. They can go for the sale while your organization tries to create a brand that makes end-users pull through, which is often a time- and resource-consuming endeavor. Unless you have the

budget and the ability to be patient and diligent with your awareness campaigns and brand building, these competitive point solutions are going to eat you up when it comes to the point of sale.

A brand's objective is to build trust, to stand for an expected experience. That is what you should strive to provide to your global counterparts. Make it easier for them to get an appointment, make it so that their prospects have heard of the company they represent, make it so that their product/offer looks legitimate. Then let them sell.

Consistency Vs. Relevancy

Issue:

All participants noted this as one of their key problems; maintaining consistency of brand and marketing messaging while remaining relevant to the local prospect.

Resolution:

Publish brand standards and guidelines that ensure consistency of identity, leaving room for versioning and promotion relevant to the local market needs.

Create a messaging platform that identifies value propositions and key messages for specific market and product/point solutions.

Focus Upstream message on business benefits that are more brand-oriented.

Focus Midstream message on operational advantages that speak to the value proposition of specific point solutions, but support the brand promise of Upstream message.

Centralized Marketing and Decision Making Vs. Decentralized Marketing and Decision Making

Issue:

International sales offices tend to think corporate marketing gets in the way, making obstacles that actually make selling harder.

Resolution:

Resist the urge to wrestle all control and budget from your local counterparts, leaving them completely out of the loop. Their input is essential to their buy-in and your success. So, solicit regional input before creating marketing plans to get their ideas of how to support marketing/sales goals.

Create marketing programs next, tying to business objectives. Establish monthly conference calls and quarterly/biannual meetings with international counterparts to plan and review.

Executive sponsorship is vital to make it all happen. Senior leadership has to be the bridge between Sales and Marketing, and between the brand and promotional efforts of company.

Infrastructure Vs. Channel

Issue:

Should you try to establish a marketing organization in-country, or rely on channel partners to help you establish your brand and spread your messages?

In addition, where do you spend your marketing dollars: in end-user-focused awareness building efforts or channel-focused sales building efforts. This can lead to "fragmentation" of your budget, which occurs when marketing efforts are spread thinly. This could be a major factor for slow progress of growth goals.

Resolution:

For most small- to mid-sized B2B companies, establishing an in-country marketing department or organization is not feasible, unless it's through an acquired company with an established department.

Therefore, a local sales office or representative often substitutes as your marketing resource. This is adequate for testing messages and translations, or assisting you in finding local media resources.

But be wary of their understanding or support of pure business and marketing objectives. They are thinking about sales first, their customers second and maybe the company's marketing and brand objectives as a distant third. And don't take their "word" as research. They are one perspective, often closer to the truth than you, but still just an opinion and no substitute for research.

Other organizations have established a channel partner or reseller in-country. In this case, a manufacturer controls the brand-building portion of the budget, and establishes a co-op marketing fund to be spent on sales-building initiatives at the discretion of the partner.

For these relationships, it is important to invest in a solid brand identity program that partners can draw from as a basis for their own efforts, i.e. PowerPoints, trade show graphics, ad and collateral templates. Add a partner portal for communicating programs and centralizing marketing resources. Promote your programs to partners like they are a primary target audience.

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