

Seeing the International Forest for the Trees

Making a Global Effort That Fits Your Organization

- How can I tune my global effort to my organization's broader strategic goals?
- Why is this important?
- What happens if I don't?

By

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In this article, we borrow from an American saying and step back from the trees to look at the forest of your international effort. Let's start with some basic business logic:

If you must obtain and retain upper management's buy-in to achieve success in international markets;

and

If the "forest-view" is the one most important to upper management;

then

Your efforts need to fit both your organization and its strategic goals, because that's the forest-view in which upper management is interested.

Upper Management's Buy-in

Nothing thrives in the organization without the support of upper management (except perhaps gossip). Your international development, sales and marketing efforts live and die by this support (and maybe by gossip), which means you will need to sell and keep selling management on your ideas. Two eternal rules of successful selling will serve you well here:

- 1) Ask upper management what they want and expect from the effort.
- 2) Get commitments from them.

Ask Them What They Want

When you ask management what they want, start by asking what they want for the entire company. *If your global effort does not fit with the rest of the company, it is doomed.* Next, pour that answer through the filter of international products, and management will probably tell you they expect profitability, and that they expect it pretty soon. After all, nobody wants to lose money in building foreign markets, and most people in management don't understand how much this is going to cost or how long it's going to take.

Management is also likely to be interested in:

(if you're big)

- cultivating company/brand name worldwide
- increasing market share through alliances and perhaps through acquisition
- international technology transfers

(if you're small)

- having more revenue against which to defray development expenses
- becoming a more appealing partner for OEM and bundling deals

You probably won't have anticipated priorities at this level—since you're usually focused on narrower, make-my-numbers goals—but you cement management's buy-in when you solicit and honor those priorities.

Get Their Commitments

You'll also need to be creative in getting management's commitment to the program. Explaining to management what you need from them is a big step towards success. Try asking executive staff for commitments to all of the following (and more) and see how much you get:

- participation on a press tour
- quick turnaround on contractual issues
- additional discretionary authority for yourself
- respect for the "long view" towards profitability—it may take 2-5 years
- meetings with overseas customers, either at home or on the road

When you can get management to make a commitment back to you, yours is no longer an isolated, unilateral effort.

Keeping Upper Management Apprised

International efforts crave visibility. Not obsession, but visibility. For most American companies, international markets are often still mysterious, so the less international experience executives have, the more likely they are to scrutinize and even mistrust your effort. To avoid this, you should keep your international effort—both victories and defeats—as visible as necessary, with the goal of educating management on what it takes to build and run an international effort. Incorporate its status as a regular part of your presentation or report to management.

First and foremost, of course, you need to demonstrate how much additional money is in the company thanks to overseas sales. Beyond the quantitative dimension of finances, build into your reporting a qualitative element that gives your effort personality and brings the foreign reach back into headquarters.

- Your business plan should have milestones (e.g., at one-, three- and five-year marks). Keep these goals alive, and call attention to your progress relative to them.
- Don't just announce the opening of your office in Osaka; record a 5-minute tour of it and roll the videotape at the executive staff meeting, or make it available via internal Webcast. Ensure it contains "internationalia": trade show footage, the 4:00 tea-time break, the workspace layout, the neighborhood near the office, ethnically clad passersby, etc.
- Don't just come back from a trade show in Hanover with purchase orders; bring 200 small bags of Gummi-Bären and place one on everybody's desk. Then follow it up with e-mail on how the show went.
- Subscribe to the International Herald-Tribune or The Times of London or El Nacional and leave it where it can be shared.

Fit the Organization

To restate it, your international vision must support your firm's strategic vision. If the strategic goal is to make the company as profitable as possible and sell it as soon as possible, the higher short-term cost of developing international business will soon prove incompatible with it.

Continue to talk to upper management about the company's strategic goals so that you don't receive any unpleasant surprises, or you may find that your plans for a plant in Malaysia conflict with the newly unveiled goal of remaining a made-in-America company.

Set management's expectations for the international effort in line with the industry. Going international with software and hardware products, for example, has the pedigree of being "the thing to do," and targets of 40% of revenue or more from overseas markets are common here. If your company's management doesn't realize that, it's up to you to educate them.

Now Go Back to Looking at the Trees

These are ways to tune your global effort to your organization's broader strategic goals. Practicing this kind of high-level hygiene will help you pick your battles more intelligently and allow you to focus more productively on the international, nuts-and-bolts work at hand. Management that is not working against you, is working for you.

Next Steps

You've learned something from this paper, haven't you? You'd like a strong process, plan and player for your localization project, wouldn't you?

To give your localization effort every chance of succeeding:

1. Help yourself to other resources on our Web site.
2. Become as conversant in localization terminology as you can.
3. Contact us for a **free assessment** of your project, before you paint yourself into any corners.

John White of venTAJA Marketing (johnw@ventajaNOSPAMmarketing.com) offers localization project management and international product management for technology companies. In the interest of helping those around him see the international forest for the trees, he has had the satisfaction of placing 200 small bags of Gummi-Bären on his co-workers' desks. Frank Martin, international sales consultant, also contributed to this article.