



Posted on Mon, Jan. 05, 2009

Exporting a product is a learning process

Q: Revenues for my manufacturing business are declining. We would like to increase our customer base by expanding into foreign markets. How can we identify the best countries to buy our products?

A: To successfully export, you will need to invest adequate resources.

But one way to first assess customer interest, as well as scout foreign competition, is to display at an international trade show and — literally — see who stops by. Have samples or working models of your products to display, along with product literature.

Foreign distributors will attend the show to find products they want to sell. Collect distributors' thoughts and gather information on interested distributors. If you decide to pursue their market, you will probably need a local agent or distributor.

Pay attention to comments on your product, especially those regarding the need for modifications. You may need to factor this into your cost analysis down the road.

You can find trade shows through relevant industry associations and publications. Also, Web sites, such as www.biztradeshows.com, compile trade show information by country. If you can't find a truly "international" show, begin with a specific country. Research countries that seem logical based on your customer base. Next, gather more detailed information to substantiate your assumption. Finally, "experiment" at a show in that country.

For more information on exporting and for country-specific data, go to: www.export.gov; www.kansascommerce.com; and www.ded.mo.gov.

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