

HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT EXPORT MANAGER

By Erik C. Meyer

To guarantee a successful and long-lasting presence in global markets, companies require export managers who are not only at home around the world but are in tune with the varying economic, business, and cultural differences in other markets. In many cases, however, corporate management does not seem to see the need for this type of executive.

Any company, especially the small or mid-sized firm, cannot neglect some basic planning before seriously entering the global marketplace or entering into previously untapped international markets. Once the commitment for expansion is made, the first step should be the hiring of qualified individuals or the contracting with an outside expert to develop an international presence.

Varying business methods and conditions around the world must be understood and the individual must have experience in order to avoid the pitfalls and mistakes that many a company has experienced and paid for dearly. An appropriate export manager must possess a number of basic qualities that are



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essential to an international affinity:

- An open mind to the rest of the world and an appreciation for the cultural, economic, and business differences encountered. This will assure that the personal relationships that are so important in many countries can be developed.
- An understanding of global economics, world cultures, and of how business is conducted in other areas of the world. This understanding will immensely facilitate doing business — plus make it easier to explain to corporate management exactly what to expect from a particular market.
- A willingness to do extensive overseas travel to establish business bases in other countries. The telephone is an impractical means of establishing

overseas business because of language barriers and different time zones. Letters, faxes, and telexes are not the best tools to communicate to partners and customers the plans a company has for that market.

- Linguistic abilities to be able to speak to clients and interpret information in host countries, and gauge the economic and political climate. Studying local business papers and magazines renders invaluable information.

- The ability to relate to people of varying cultural backgrounds and be the company's global representative. Personal relationships often play a far greater role in generating business in foreign lands than detailed technical knowledge.

Qualifications like these cannot be obtained in a crash course but rather are acquired over many years of direct experience. Product knowledge is important, however the understanding and appreciation of international business has far greater importance. Product knowledge can usually be acquired in about six months. But it is downright foolish to assign the international planning, marketing, and operations responsibilities to someone who has proven his capabilities by being the best regional manager in the company. By assigning an enthusiastic yet inexperienced person to international duties, a company can destroy a career and cause irreparable damage to its own export prospects. ■



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