

EXPORT THROUGH A GENDER LENS: SECTION 4

Helping clients cultivate and nurture export relationships

For Canadian entrepreneurs, an international customer is a valuable asset and should be treated as such. Having international customers gives a brand reach that would otherwise require years of overseas marketing. As their advisor, you can assist your clients in laying out the steps they can take to both find, and keep, these important customers.

STEP 1: CULTIVATION - HELPING CLIENTS GROW THEIR NETWORK AND FIND THEIR CUSTOMERS

Growing a successful export business requires an entrepreneur to build an export network in the countries in which they want to do business. That network can help them navigate everything from cultural norms to business regulations and help strengthen ties to the local business community. These connections can prove especially useful for women trying to navigate cross-cultural, cross-generational, or male dominated sectors abroad. While their export network may not at first include customers, these connections may contribute to long-term success.

As their advisor, you may recommend that your clients contact local businesses in the market for insights into cultural factors and regulations. If there is an existing women's entrepreneurial support organization in the market, they may be able to tap into an existing network and benefit from its member support services.

Networking may expose your clients to mentors that can help them scale their businesses and increase its reach in a new market. These invaluable connections may also lead to forming or joining a strategic alliance, which may help them meet the requirements of a new contract and improve market reach.

Seek out **trade missions and conferences** – both virtual and in-person – and focus on making connections with presenters and other delegates. Encourage your clients to put their names forward as speakers and panelists. This not only gives their business exposure, but also opens more networking opportunities.

“Although my goal with export is to capture the North American market, I think it is also important to explore the possibility of further international export. For instance, I went on a trade mission to Japan with the Women’s Business Missions through the Asia Pacific Foundation to look for potential sales outside of North America,” says Serese Selanders, CEO of ORA and SolusGuard.

Encourage your clients to take the time to educate themselves and their staff on different customs within their customer’s culture, specifically when it comes to gender norms. This could include superficial things like appropriate attire and ways of addressing one another, or broad views on leadership and management approaches. This understanding will promote good relationships and respect among their prospective international customers.

STEP 2: NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH CONSISTENT CUSTOMER SERVICE

Just as it does with customers at home, good customer service with international customers plays a significant role in establishing trust and building solid relationships that will sustain a business over the long term. A company’s policies and procedures related to customer service in person, on the phone, and by email or web comment, helps bring consistency to customer interactions and improves the customer experience. Encourage your clients to make sure their employees understand the value of existing customer relationships and are aware of the protocols for greeting and serving customers in each market.

“When you’re working with long-distance customers, it is important to be highly attentive to customers and prospective customers in order to gain their trust and business,” says Colleen Haussecker. Her company, Canadian Organic and Spice & Herb Co. exports its Splendor Garden brand to both Europe and Asia.

COMMUNICATING FROM AFAR

While travel restrictions may have grounded your clients in recent years, they have likely gotten comfortable establishing relationships using virtual methods like Zoom, Teams, email, and social media such as LinkedIn. While these methods can be convenient, it's more professional to discuss important topics over the phone or in person once possible. Ideally, entrepreneurs should plan for an in-person customer visit at least once a year. Not only does this show their customers the respect and the importance they place on the relationship, but it also gives them an opportunity to get to know their clients on a more personal level. Customers will remember who made the extra effort to visit and stay in contact.

As an advisor, you may have connections with international trade organizations and can help advise your clients of relevant conferences and **trade missions**. If circumstances are such that your client and one of their customers are attending the same industry conference, encourage them to set aside time to take that customer out for a meal or sit together at breakout sessions. This interaction will nurture a strong client relationship and will provide an opportunity to get to know them on a personal level. So much of human communication is the one-on-one interaction to establish long term business relationships and trust.

THE BALANCING OF LOYALTIES

Advisors often hear from clients that they struggle with balancing the cultivating of new customers, and the nurturing of existing ones. This can be especially true when they have longstanding customers at home – be it a bricks and mortar store, or a reliable base of Canadian clients. It is important to review with clients how they plan to manage the additional needs of international customers as all customers require consistent customer service.

You may need to help them reconsider and revise what they promise domestic and international customers in order to be realistic and consistent. Consistent follow up is key to nurturing business relationships in foreign markets because it takes more effort to do so among other cultures, especially as a woman entrepreneur. It will be important for your clients to understanding the style and bargaining power of their counterpart and its importance in international negotiations and relationship building. In their preparations and during the negotiations, they should be mindful of this dynamic. They should take note of the gender-specific barriers in different cultures that may impede export activity and relationship building.

Never underestimate the importance of sticking to and following up on what's promised. This can make or break the business relationship your client has established. As an example, sending a quick follow-up email after each call should be a standard practice, thanking them for their time, and restating the agreed upon next steps. If your client has a staff working with them, they will need to plan how they too can help customer service stay consistent through their interactions. As their advisor, you may want to suggest they establish a business process and communications standard manual to support their staff with interactions.

In order for business processes and standards to be effective, it must be well documented to clearly reflect the vision and strategy of the business, and there must be a unified commitment to plan, develop, implement, and sustain the practices. It also involves ongoing training and feedback to cultivate a deep culture of nurturing customers to ensure full customer satisfaction.

If this level of customer service is already the norm, kudos to you and your client, but make sure steps are in place to make it easy to maintain the relationship with a customer who lives a continent away. Keeping a reference list of time zone differences, important cultural holidays, and appropriate greetings and signatures in their language are small things that ultimately show a level of commitment from a business. As an example, a simple email wishing their customers a "warm and happy Eid" conveys that you are in tune with the customs of the country. You want to demonstrate that you care, and without physically being able to meet, this is a great option.