

International Growth

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Beyond Brexit



British online retailers are trading strongly around the world.
How is that likely to change as a result of Brexit? **Chloe Rigby** reports

IRUK TOP500 RETAILERS are doing strong international business online, feeding appetites for goods that are seen as quintessentially British.

Burberry sells its trenchcoats and upmarket clothing to shoppers around the world, with strong demand from China. Whittard of Chelsea is selling tea to China, along with coffee and hot chocolate, while Waitrose is selling a range that includes the Prince of Wales' Duchy Originals-brand biscuits into the same market, as well as to expats through the British Corner Shop website.

Pureplay Asos, which has been selling its fast fashion overseas for many years, now sees 59% of its sales from international markets, while Boohoo.com said that 36% of its latest sales were made overseas.

All these retailers are engaging with their international customers through localised websites that use the languages, payment methods and delivery options with which they are already familiar. IRUK Top500 research finds that Boohoo, for example, engages with customers via Facebook pages in four country-specific languages, – French, Dutch, German and Spanish. It also performs well on Twitter, where it had more than 447,000 followers at the time of the research. Its marketing also engages with the wider world – it sponsors a

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French reality show and works with local bloggers and personalities in each market.

Many UK retailers take their first steps into new, further afield markets through that region's marketplaces as well as through their brand's own website. Whittard of Chelsea, Waitrose and Sainsbury's are all using Alibaba Group's Tmall Global website in China, following in the footsteps of brands from Clarins to Burberry that have long used marketplaces in Asia. By doing so, they benefit from instant entry into a foreign market with a well-known, trusted vendor. All that is left to worry about are the costs of shipping, taxes and duties, rather than the logistics of moving products. They're not alone. But while such sites provide a strong initial point of entry, retailers are less able to control the way the brand is presented and do

Ten issues to consider

1 THINK GLOBALLY, EVEN IF YOU DON'T GO GLOBAL: If this isn't the right time to go ahead with exploring new markets, there's still room to plan for the longer term by keeping an eye on developments further afield.

2 FOREIGN LANGUAGES: What are the language implications of trading in a new market? Is there a need for customer service, product descriptions or even a whole new website in that language?

3 PRACTICE, PATIENCE: Speed can often be prized in business. However, in the wake of Brexit, a slow and careful approach may yield fruit later on.

4 COST OF FULFILMENT: Any new market offers up new challenges and a major one is logistics. How will products reach customers and how much will that cost? What are the local expectations of delivery methods?

5 CULTURAL FACTORS: A new culture means a series of invisible trip wires. Is there something a brand communicates that could be taken as offensive or – perhaps worse – inadvertently funny? Might a supplier with local knowledge head off problems here?

6 UNDERSTANDING BREXIT: Panicking in the face of political change shows inexperience. Dealing with that change in a methodical manner will triumph over difficulties.

7 LOOK INWARD: When targeting a new country, ask around as to whether you have any natives in the company. They may have a ready supply insight and connections.

8 TRIM MARGINS: A new region will bear unexpected costs, with the higher cost of delivery being just the first. To encourage growth, some businesses choose just to bear this cost rather than send it to the consumer, but there are long-term risks here.

9 GO LOCAL: Where appropriate, hire local talent and outsource services in order to get the most from indigenous expertise. Locals will know things that can only be understood having grown up in that country.

10 DELIVER: A strong, local content delivery network (CDN) is mandatory for businesses that want a strong ecommerce presence in another country.



not gain the same benefit from the data generated from ecommerce transactions as they would on their own websites.

That fact, as well as the prospect of increased brand awareness, makes the eventual opening of their own brand website and even stores more attractive. This is, naturally, a more complex route. Asos closed its China website after finding the market too difficult, while Next recently moved its Chinese operation out of a free trade zone into its own operation on mainland China.

In Europe, trading has been much more straightforward thanks to the development of a single digital market that promised to remove tariffs and other barriers to entry between the 31 countries of the European Economic Area. However, that may be set to change following the decision by UK voters to leave the European Union.

Looking to the future

As yet, it remains unclear what Brexit will mean in practice for UK retailers. Some have warned that long-term, their prices may have to rise if the pound continues to be as weak as it was over summer 2016, in the wake of the vote. Next, for example, said that despite hedging that would keep its prices down until January 2017, its cost prices could rise by up to 5% next year.

In the shorter term, however, retail sales remain buoyant. In August 2016, according to official Office for National Statistics estimates, shoppers spent 4.1% more than they did a year earlier. Online sales were up by 18.5% on the previous year.

It remains largely through the value of the pound, rising retail sales and the more intangible – though as yet optimistic – measures of confidence that commentators have as yet been able to measure the Brexit effect on consumers' propensity to shop.

Multichannel businesses planning their strategies for the longer term will no doubt be cautious about assuming that this level of consumer confidence and spending will continue. It's the uncertainty about

exactly what Brexit will mean that still concerns many. But in the short term, UK retailers continue to sell overseas while other retailers, new to this country, are targeting UK shoppers known for their propensity to spend online. IREU Top500 electronics company Alza, of the Czech Republic, says the UK will be a very important part of its international operations. "We have invested significantly in providing an alternative source for consumers who are looking for the right products at the right price, and a quality of service to back that up with an established name that they can trust," said Jiri Maly, head of international marketing at Alza at the time of the launch.

Certainly, it seems that UK shoppers are very willing to consider buying both from such new entrants, and to look cross-border at those selling from further afield. Research by Bronto Software, published in August 2016, suggested that 80% of UK online shoppers would consider buying from a retailer beyond the UK, while 44% have already done so. Some 62% say they would do in order to buy unique products, while 50% are searching for better prices.

Among the younger generation, more than half of consumers aged under 35 are buying from retailers outside the UK, with 60% of those aged between 16 and 24 doing so. That suggests that in the future, cross-border shopping will only go further mainstream, despite the effects of Brexit.

In summary

Brexit needn't force the hands of retailers to either expand in a hurry or await a better political situation. Carrying through an existing strategy, albeit a strategy amended to take account of current turbulence, is a better approach. Look for suppliers with specific knowledge and expertise that will help achieve this strategy.

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