

BECOMING CREDIBLE IN EXPORT MARKETS

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The single biggest challenge professional service firms face is not being able to show clients ahead of time the service for which they will be paying. Because the service does not yet exist, there are several opportunities for misunderstanding. First, potential clients may not be convinced that your firm can meet their needs even though you can. Second, if they do decide to use your services, they may have in mind a different service than you actually provide. Third, they may have unrealistic expectations of the service delivery process (e.g., how quickly you will complete the service or how frequently they will be consulted). Fourth, during the time period when you are creating the service, their needs or expectations may change based on what is happening in the marketplace.

Clients manage their risk by using personal recommendations – i.e., referrals and testimonials – in selecting a new service provider. So your task is to get your network to refer clients to you and then to reinforce clients' choice once they have selected your firm. If you are known and respected within your network, those referral sources will be invaluable allies in convincing potential clients to try your services. So focus first on your positioning within your referral network.

Remember that, in the eyes of your client, the service does not exist until it is created during the delivery process. From a marketing perspective, then, you can promote a firm's capabilities but cannot "market the product" in the traditional sense. The most common error that professional service firms make is to follow a product marketing approach of focusing initially on the service to be promoted rather than on establishing your credibility as a firm that can address certain types of client needs. Instead, you will want to adopt a two-stage approach to market development: first, become credible as a supplier; second, focus in on the specific way that you can provide value to clients.

In your home market, people already know you and talk with each other about the benefits you provide so it is less important that you be articulate. But in a new market where you are still unknown, there is not that type of word-of-mouth blessing operating yet. You will have to get it started by being specific and concise about what distinguishes you from your competition.

There are a range of activities that can help build your credibility, such as making presentations at conferences, writing articles, becoming active in your industry association, and pro bono or volunteer work. As you begin your export planning, or refine your existing strategies, don't overlook what you can do to get a good start through your home market, for example:

Foreign customers at home

The best guarantee of your competence, of course, is prior experience with your services. But when you are new to the export market, this is not an option with foreign customers. An alternative is to survey your domestic market for foreign firms with whom you can work. If you build a good reputation with them, you can

then ask them to refer you to other customers in their home market.

Local industry conferences

Another technique is to become active in the staging of an industry event in your home market that can attract foreign participants. Without incurring any travel costs, you will have an opportunity to meet potential foreign customers or referral sources in the “special” capacity of conference organizer.

None of us can survive in business without a strong network of information and referral sources. In your home market, your network may have developed without your conscious planning. To be a successful exporter, you will need to replicate your domestic network success in your new target market. The critical factor here is the *mind set* of networking ... recognizing networking as important, not a waste of time. Networking is important not simply because of the information you gather, but because of the sense of *co-operation* or goodwill that you create. So make networking a priority by training your staff in networking skills and scheduling time for them to go to networking events.

An important purpose of networking is to encourage persons who know your capabilities to become active in recommending your firm to others. So it is important to nurture key relationships, especially with others who themselves have extensive networks. You will want to provide potential advocates with frequent updates on your accomplishments, particularly as you expand into export markets, and alert them to the types of opportunities that would be ideal for your firm. When they are helpful, it is of course important to acknowledge the help they have provided so that they feel their efforts are appreciated.