



The products and the places

To sell anything, anywhere — your lawnmower to your next-door neighbour or airplanes to an airline half a world away — there are two basic essentials: something to sell and, somewhere, somebody to buy it. The two are inseparable; if either is absent, no sale can take place.

Therefore, your first step as a potential exporter is to identify which of your products have the greatest export sales possibilities and where those most promising sales opportunities are likely to be found.

It's also worth remembering that the "products" need not be physical ones, things you can see, hear, feel, taste or smell. Ideas, techniques, processes, know-how, experience and other knowledge are all valuable commercial "products" worth money to customers who do not yet have them.

Product assessment

Start assessing your potential as an exporter with a realistic critique of your product(s) in a global framework. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Who uses your product? Is it in broad general use or is it limited to a particular socio-economic group? (Your answer here may immediately rule out certain markets.)
- Is the use of your product influenced or affected by climatic or geographic factors? If so, what?

- What is the shelf-life? Will your product be affected by its time in transit?
- Does your product involve operating costs? If so, what complementary equipment or services must the customer buy before it can be used?

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- Does it require professional assembly or other technical skills?
- Is special packaging or literature required? (If so, these costs must be factored in to determine whether or not you can export the product at a competitive price.)
- Must you consider technical standards or regulatory requirements that may differ from those in Canada and from country to country?
- Keeping your answers to some of the above in mind, will product adaptation be needed for your target markets? Will adaptation be difficult or simple to carry out? Are there other markets where fewer or no adaptations would be needed?
- Should you consider after-sales service? Is it needed? Is it locally available or must you provide it? If you must provide it, can you?
- How easily can the product be shipped? Would shipping costs make competitive pricing a problem?

- Among the countries in your list of potential markets, are there any in which customer acceptance of your product might be constrained by such negatives as a glut on the local market, import barriers or political roadblocks? Or are there religious or cultural traditions against the product-type? (For example, the most succulent, frozen gourmet barbecue pork chops just won't make it in most Middle East countries.)

Your own answers to these initial questions should give you a pretty good idea of the export sales potential of your best products and services.

The places

Now that you have chosen your products for export, you still must identify your target market countries. But before you do, there's another very important judgment to be made:

If you decide to export, are you sure that you have, or will have, the capability to serve both your present domestic customers as well as the new foreign customers you hope to win? Will you be able to dedicate sufficient production to export customers regardless of the domestic demand?