



ExportSavvy Case-Study

Maxim B2B

Due diligence the key in new markets

It's not even four years since MaximB2B was created, looking to establish itself in the ultra-competitive global rewards industry.

Its aim was to develop a powerful offer for reward schemes and benefit programmes for companies, their employees, their suppliers and their dealers.

The Stratford-based business had ambitious short-term targets; to evolve an innovative business model, acquire a raft of high-profile retail clients looking to develop new revenue streams, and break through into international reward programmes.

Impressively, MaximB2B has already completed its strategic hat-trick, and chief operating officer David Whitby reports that it now has a solid presence throughout Western Europe; with major customers in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

"Essentially, we create reward offers in four categories. Rewards for a company or organisation's employees, loyalty programmes for a company's customers, trade schemes, typically to reward loyalty among dealers or distributors and voluntary benefit programmes, where staff can buy benefits from their employer," he says.

"Across Europe, we know that sector is worth £30 billion a year, so the potential, if you can win even a small slice of that business, is absolutely huge."

MaximB2B's exclusive retail clients now number 30, including Ted Baker, Clarks, Goldsmiths, Sports Direct and Superdry, whilst it also has productive partnerships with an array of agencies which supply major corporates in non-retail sectors.

Partnership approach pays off

"We have a relationship with an agency in Switzerland, for example, which works with Etihad Airways, Alitalia, Airberlin and other major airlines, and we create loyalty rewards for the staff and customers of their clients," says Whitby.

"At the end of February 2016, we have engaged 170 retailers in nine countries, and we're nowhere near finished, even with those territories. In Germany, we work with 40 brands, in Italy, we have 25, so although that's a great starting point, there's still huge scope.

By the start of April, I expect us to have signed up with another 15 European brands, and as our client list and our reputation grows, I am confident that we'll continue to build on our early achievements. By the end of 2016, we expect to have increased our European retail client-base to 300."

For sure, although MaximB2B was a start-up, it did have two major advantages in its favour.

As a subsidiary of the AIM-listed Park Group plc, the UK's largest player in the multi-retail voucher and gift-card sectors, it had access to both significant amounts of expertise and data.

Whitby also had a 25-year track record in High Street retail on his CV, including the successful B2B division for Argos.

Equally though, MaximB2B was established as a separate trading division within Park Group, with its own management team, corporate strategy and client-base, so it had to succeed very much on its own.

However, Whitby is swift to stress that its achievements have been down to the quality and depth of advice and support his company received from UKTI.

Never try to 'fly solo' overseas

"We knew we couldn't break into overseas markets by ourselves, however much we knew about the UK, so we went to Ajay Desai, the head of international trade at our local Chamber of Commerce (Coventry & Warwickshire) and essentially asked what he and his colleagues here and overseas could do for us.

"We'd identified nine countries on mainland Europe, but we were advised to start by targeting just six. We then joined the Passport to Export initiative, and learned about the Overseas Market Introduction Service (OMIS).

"Everything we have achieved in the last three years or so has come from that starting point, and honestly, what UKTI has done for us is really quite sensational. Breaking into retail anywhere is challenging, and more so in a new market, in new countries, where you don't even have a language in common.

"We could only do so much; we identified target sectors, and niches within those sectors, but we didn't know how to target individual companies and organisations, how to identify the best directors, or how to put together a commercial proposition which would appeal to them, and be tailored to their markets.

"I am now the biggest advocate for UKTI, because what they have done for us, and because their people have become the backbone for our operations across Europe. They've given me contacts in the commercial teams at our embassies, I've contacted them, and they have consistently opened doors for us."

Whitby says UKTI has also allowed himself and his colleagues to use embassies as both physical bases, and venues for their launch events, citing Vienna, Paris and Milan as successful instances of such a partnership approach.

"In Paris, the commercial attache and international trade advisers lined up retailers for us, pretty much all at board-level and almost every one of those individuals spoke English. Where someone wasn't fluent in English, the embassy provided high-quality interpreters, and that's been the case elsewhere too," he recalls.

"Even using all our resources, and the data-base from Park Group, we simply couldn't have achieved such results by ourselves. We've achieved so much in such a relatively short space of time, that we're now recruiting more staff back in Stratford, and looking for three key senior people to work in Europe."

Market research is an absolute must

However, Whitby admits MaximB2B's achievements are underpinned by months of meticulous market and sectoral research and analysis.

"We're a business that knows what it wants, and before we even approached UKTI's overseas network, we planned everything we could from our perspective in huge detail," he says.

"You hear horror stories of companies expecting that they'll just go on a trade mission, and expect everything to be presented to them, but that isn't the case, and no-one should expect otherwise.

"Success in export markets is all about the quality and depth of the briefings you give to the people you hope can help you. They need to know precisely what you require, and companies who fail to provide such detail can't expect to succeed.

"We spent days on briefings with UKTI people, and it's absolutely worth it. It also emphasises our commitment to winning new business in new territories, and makes life much easier for the staff we are dealing with.

"We also have regular dialogue with our contacts at each embassy. You can't just ring up 24 hours before you're going out, you have to build relationships with people, and use them as sounding boards before you start devising your export strategy, not when you've finished it.

"Like anything in life, what you get out relates to what you put in, and because we're committed to the process of winning new customers in Europe, we're getting the best results from our efforts."

Think on!

Could your business learn from Maxim's hard-won experience?

David Whitby has made good use of UKTI to underpin his international growth. This includes careful preparation for overseas visits, taking time to brief people you want help from carefully and networking into the UKTI overseas network. How well do you understand what help is available? Have you built the kind of proactive relationship with UKTI that is yielding real results?

David also places great emphasis on the value of research and the identification of niche opportunities. How well do you understand your target markets and the gaps that you might be able to fill?

You can explore some of the issues raised here in more depth in the following modules in the Savvy Academy:

[The Road Ahead](#)

[Simple Desk Research](#)

