The Impact of Customers' Language Use on Internet Marketing Success

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Abstract: This paper assesses the use of foreign languages by Scottish food and drink exporters, in relation to the expectations and experiences of their French counterparts. In particular, the research explores the strategies employed in relation to e-Business and the Internet.

The central hypothesis is that the marketing presence of Scottish exporters, incorporating the use of foreign languages, is currently inadequate. New initiatives must promote their presence more effectively to allow for a distinctive positioning and image that will contribute to overall success.

The primary research findings demonstrate that existing practice should be revised on the basis of the competitive advantage that importers derive from superior language skills.

Scottish firms export increasingly to non-English speaking markets, but only a third employ staff with foreign language skills. Only 14% of respondents however, believe that communication and cultural barriers contribute significantly to export difficulties. They do not presently explore the full potential of the Internet as a marketing tool. Product quality, service reliability and communications skills are considered to be the principal characteristics needed to achieve export success, but communications skills are seen as the appropriate interactive style, rather than the ability to communicate in the customer's own language.

French companies use the Internet in a proactive way both to identify and contact suppliers and study technical product information. They attend trade exhibitions to check product quality first hand. They would welcome more personal contact. All companies surveyed can rely on English proficiency among their staff, but there are situations, for example price negotiations, where the importers would prefer to use their own language. They have limited expectations however, of
Scottish suppliers and therefore experience no real sense of dissatisfaction. Instead, they regard English as the international language and turn the situation to their psychological advantage.

Language is clearly a powerful instrument for control in the import/export equation. Being able to use the language most appropriate for a particular situation provides clear tactical advantage.

Scottish exporters must therefore create a professional, competitive and responsive online presence, to act as a shop window and to establish a modern image unaffected by size. They should ensure that they are easily found on the Internet and positively assessed by devoting resources to the accessibility, usability and quality of content in terms of comprehensive, comprehensible and reliable product information.