

Guess what?

There are people outside of North America...and they are checking you out!

By Bob 'Idea Man' Hooley

With the advent and rapid expansion of global Internet use, more and more companies are entering a new arena in marketing and customer service. Is there a fortune to be made for your company? Or is it a black hole to pour money into and hope someone out there is reading it? Worse yet, how do people who live in non-English speaking areas able to take advantage of your services?

According to a recent study by International Data Corp., Western Europe is projected to be an expanding hot zone with on-line spending estimated to reach 430 billion by 2003. Experts predict Western European Internet users will almost match those in North America by the same time. With 50% of all Internet users estimated to live outside North America it would make sense to think seriously about how you serve such a diverse mixture of customers. Gee, 24 hour orders and hits seven days a week. Sounds like a dream -- doesn't it?

"Identifying a foreign market is only the first step" say experts, "Actually tapping into it is a far trickier matter." Looking at this emerging market from a North American viewpoint won't work to exploit this opportunity. Depending on your company you may need to set up and implement delivery and warehousing infrastructures with access and understanding of foreign currencies, laws and business norms. And you would need to translate and maintain content that presents or captures the various nuances, subtleties, and tastes of another culture, not your own.

This means getting to understand how the various nationalities you intend marketing to think and shop. Customer service just entered a challenging new era. One way would be to partner with local firms and strategic alliances in the major areas in which you feel you might draw new customers. What if you want them to visit you here in your city? Then what?

"European companies, in particular, have an advantage over US companies because they're used to dealing with different cultures and doing business multiple languages," according to Forrester Research director John C. McCarthy. "We (North America) are used to living in a monolithic English cocoon." The net may cross borders with ease, but capturing different cultures is more than just having them access an English Speaking site.

There are some new Internet based startups that are responding to this new challenge. Some of these companies will help tackle the challenges of language and cultural issues in addition to translation services. Not cheap but less expensive than blowing your first foreign impression.

Check out: www.etranslate.com, www.idiomtech.com, www.worldpoint.com, www.globalsight.com, and www.uniscape.com if you are seriously considering entering this exciting new arena. Expanding your company's presence will be a challenge but the effort will be worth it.

Remember new customers require a new level in Customer Service

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