

Look to Africa to grow your sales channel

Africa's image is rapidly changing as more foreign investors clamour to forge ties with African businesses. In the recent 2013 Africa Competitiveness Report, which was produced by the World Bank, the World Economic Forum and the African Development Bank, it is revealed that Africa has managed to grow at an average of more than 8% during the past decade, when the rest of the world were battling to stay afloat during the recession.



By Louise Robinson 2 Sep 2013

According to Mohamed El-Erian, CEO of the global investment firm PIMCO, foreign direct investment in sub-Saharan Africa has leapt from \$6 billion in 2000 to \$34 billion in 2012. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) believes that this upswing is set to continue. In its recently issued Regional Economic Outlook for sub-Saharan Africa, the IMF forecasts a regional economic growth of five and a half percent in 2013-2014, compared to 5% in 2012.

With evidence of such solid growth, this is definitely the perfect time for enterprises to expand their businesses throughout the continent. With small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in Africa reportedly numbering to more than 20 million, there is an abundance of opportunities to tap into.

Where do you begin?

Fair enough, but if you are sold on the idea of growing your sales channel into Africa, where do you begin? Do you just start to call up various businesses left right and centre, hoping that someone will enter into a partnership with you to buy or help you sell your own product or service?

My answer? Sort of, but not quite. Making that appointment-setting call is definitely the first step to take, yes. But unless you want to waste a lot of time and money, you can't just pick up the Yellow Pages for say, Lagos, and randomly call up every business listing. You need to first identify who will be the most likely to be interested in what you have to offer.

That is not easy in Africa, where information is hard to come by and the business environment poses its own unique set of challenges, one of which is the time taken to track down and contact the right decision maker. Doing the research and establishing a target market is challenging if you don't know the intricacies of business etiquette in each individual country.

Extremely difficult in Africa

To get the list of the contact details of those potential leads, enabling your appointment setter to make the call, is extremely difficult in Africa. Your company's caller has to know exactly what your business, organisation, or product is about and must also possess the ability to give a succinct, to-the-point summary of it. In addition, the caller has to be able to navigate the minefield of Africa's unique business approach in order to get to the right person. Then, if the business representative who was spoken to expresses an interest in learning more, an appointment needs to be made so that a sales person can conclude the deal, which is another long process in itself.

This initial call is crucial to establishing contact and generating a prospective lead that might turn into a sale, so it is imperative to do it correctly. You ought to view that call as being the contact that will create the potential client's first impression of your company. Your appointment-setter has to be very skilled at communicating clearly over the phone with people from other cultures. Appointment setting can be daunting at the best of times, when callers are often stonewalled by secretaries and assistants who are reluctant to put them through so that they can speak to any of the decision makers at the company. When you throw potential language and cultural barriers into the mix, it becomes even more challenging.

Many South African businesses don't have the manpower or resources to do research into the African target markets and to make those calls, but it is far more economical and time saving to outsource it to a reputable and experienced consultancy, who has the experience and knowledge of how a particular country works.

Hiring a competent marketing consultancy will be a real advantage to your business.

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