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## Selling to Overseas Customers Part I: Initial Contacts

In tough economic times, companies survive and thrive based on strong customer relationships. Yet among all the different occupations, sales is probably the most resistant to globalization. Unlike the employees of a global company who must adapt to some degree to their employer's way of doing business, customers ultimately retain the power to spend their own money.

The skill of selling across borders must successfully address the ambivalent state of mind of customers who are considering the purchase of foreign products. These customers are simultaneously attracted and repelled. They want the latest technology and prestigious foreign brands. They are also generally well aware of both the strengths and the weaknesses of domestic sources of supply. Depending upon the country, these may include significant flaws such as limited features, shoddy quality, or poor service - drawbacks that could make foreign suppliers look very attractive. Yet, the same customers do not want to work with a foreign enterprise that is perceived as trying to control them or tell them what to do.

Indeed, potential customers harbor a broad range of concerns about dealing with a foreign vendor that must be addressed before any purchase will be made. We have found that the eight questions listed below are commonly present in the minds of buyers who are located outside of a firm's home country:

1. *"How much more will it cost me to deal with a foreign supplier - is the value of the products or services they offer worth the trouble and risk of dealing with somebody 'different'?"*
2. *"Do we really matter to them or are we just another sale? How much of a priority for them will our company be if they have customers all over the world?"*
3. *"With their headquarters so far away, will they be available to help if we have trouble after the sale?"*
4. *"Are their local representatives competent and trustworthy?"*
5. *"Are they going to be a long-term player in our country's market?"*
6. *"Can I trust them or are they going to try to exploit my company, my country, or me?"*
7. *"How will I convince others in my firm that this foreign company is a good choice?"*
8. *"What are possible risks and rewards for me within my own organization if I advocate a purchase from a foreign vendor?"*

The process of addressing these concerns and making a sale is a multistage effort. While it is possible that one could encounter a buyer who wants to close the deal quickly, chances are that the sales cycle will be more protracted and demanding. This and the following newsletter will deal with several key challenges faced by salespeople working in a cross-border context:

- Initial contacts
- Handling customer concerns
- Closing the sale

### Initial Contacts

Methods of initiating customer contacts that work in many Western countries - cold calling, e-mail messages, advertisements in trade magazines, web meetings, and so on - may be less effective in other regions of the world. The preferred way to strike up a new business relationship is still frequently via the introduction of a mutually respected third party. Once this introduction is made, the salesperson must leap a number of additional hurdles to have any chance of getting further. These include a first face-to-face encounter.

Salespeople who have ambitious goals and tight schedules may find themselves impatient

with the pace of opening discussions with customers in some parts of the world. However, vital information is already being transmitted, consciously or unconsciously, that begins to answer the customer questions posed above and which shapes the buying decision.

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**Our Mission**

At Meridian Resources, our mission is to develop global citizens. We work with customers to enable each member of their global organization to become informed, engaged, and accountable.

<b>Common Relationship-Building Behaviors</b>	<b><i>Symbolic Significance to Potential Customer</i></b>
<b>Preparation:</b> Introductions, pre-contacts, information exchange, meeting arrangements	<i>Who do you know already that is willing to vouch for you? How much effort are you willing to put into preparing to work with us?</i>
<b>Initial greetings:</b> Handshake, name card exchange, gift-giving, serving of refreshments	<i>Are you aware of local protocol? Can you pronounce and remember our names? Will you accept the drinks that we offer in hospitality?</i>
<b>"Small talk":</b> The trip, impressions of the country, accommodations, length of stay	<i>How much have you tried to learn about us and about our country? What is your approach to learning more? Do you have the good sense to know what topics not to raise at this stage?</i>
<b>Personal and professional background:</b> Self-description, questions for hosts, presentation on company	<i>Do we have common interests outside of business? Are you interested in us for short-term deals or as long-term partners? What is your status within your own company and how long will you be around?</i>
<b>Language use:</b> Do you learn the local language?	<i>How important is it for you to do business in our country? Do you expect us to operate on your terms?</i>
<b>Transition to business topics:</b> Initiated by guest or host?	<i>Are you willing to work at our pace or will you impose yours?</i>
<b>Foods:</b> What dishes are you willing to try?	<i>Are you willing to step out of your comfort zone and sample things that we like? Are you open to different ways of doing things?</i>
<b>Singing:</b> Will you take the stage for karaoke?	<i>How much of your character are you willing to reveal to us? Do you have to be smart and in control all the time? What do you look like when you're playing and not working?</i>
<b>Follow-up:</b> Subsequent contacts, project updates, completion of action items, respectful use of network	<i>Do you follow up on your commitments or forget about us? Will you leverage our business network with care?</i>

Relationships must normally be established before tasks are undertaken in earnest. The process is like a dance where the partners need to discover the same rhythm and learn how to move smoothly together without stepping on each other's toes. Only when there is a fit in the relationship and a complementary rhythm has been established does the business really take off.

This dance could lead one to many places that might be considered exotic: a tent in the Saudi Arabian desert, a banquet complete with sheep's head in Kazakhstan, or the steaming hot water of a public bath with a Korean customer. But the aim is the same: to establish common ground on a human level that allows mutual trust and respect to take root, setting the stage for a successful transaction of the business yet to come.

This article has been excerpted from an upcoming book by Ernest Gundling, co-managing director of Meridian Resources, entitled "*Working GlobeSmart: 12 People Skills for Doing Business Across Borders*". "*Working GlobeSmart*" is scheduled to be published in May 2003 by Davies-Black Publishing, a division of CPP, Inc.

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