



INTERNATIONAL MARKETING GUIDES

Selecting an International Advertising Agency

The four types of marketing agencies that can help you market your brand internationally and how to know which one is right for you.



CAN YOUR BRAND SUCCEED ACROSS BORDERS?

Marketing is tough. International marketing is even tougher.

For many products and services, expansion into foreign markets can be a logical step as part of an overall growth strategy. If you have experienced strong domestic growth you may be tempted to simply replicate the marketing approach in other markets and hope for the same outcome. But it's important to bear in mind that the domestic marketing approach that has led to your success at home is not likely to work when exported.

Most CMO's would agree that successfully marketing a brand domestically is a challenge. But for brands that cross borders, that challenge is multiplied by every country they serve. Underestimating that challenge is the #1 reason we see many brands fail to thrive outside their home market. This is based on decades of work with hundreds of companies, from giant Fortune 500 multinationals to tiny basement start-ups. If your company lacks the experience required to effectively market over borders, the fastest and most effective way to compensate is to hire a marketing firm, such as an advertising agency, that specializes in international brand development.

But, what exactly defines an international advertising agency? And, what exactly will you need them to do for your business? The more clearly these questions can be answered, the better the chances that a suitable partner to help you market across borders will be found. This paper provides an overview of some of the main marketing communication and brand management issues faced by brands leaving home and the options available to help with them.

Is this advice is for you?

Before looking into selecting the right partner, let's address three assumptions about your business that this guide is based upon:

Is your brand an international brand?

First off, you'll need a product or service whose value proposition transcends the barriers of language, geography, and culture. If that's the case, then congrats, your brand has international potential. But, that doesn't make it an international brand ... yet. Some argue that any brand with a website today is international since it can be accessed globally. While it's true that the web affords access, for most brands, it is highly unlikely that access alone will play a significant role in developing the brand. Building a brand across borders requires intent, backed by resources. So we reject the claim that a brand is international by virtue of being online and accessible. An international brand is one where the owners have made the decision to develop the brand in specified markets with a specified strategy, budget, and timeline. We assume you have made the decision to be an international brand.

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Is your company small, medium, or large?

When we think of international brands, the Goliaths like Apple, Nike, IKEA, or Google come to mind. While companies of this magnitude still comprise around 45% of the GNP in the US and EU, they represent less than 1% of all companies. The majority of the

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other 99% fall in the small- to mid-sized range, with annual revenue in the €10 million to €100 million Euro range. Companies in this mid-range face unique challenges to growth, particularly if they have international ambitions.

In theory, the internet was supposed to even the playing field by allowing all brands equal access to customers beyond their home markets, even globally. But, in practice, very few mid-sized brands have the bandwidth or expertise to market effectively outside their home market. This

guide focuses on the issues and options most likely to be encountered by the 99%.

Do you want to centralize or distribute control?

Relinquishing control of the brand to local distributors or local market companies is by far the most convenient option when entering foreign markets. But, the short-term gain can be offset by long-term headaches, especially if the brand succeeds in those markets. The problem is that this decentralized approach often results in multiple interpretations of the brand being communicated in each market. This can dilute the brand's focus and values, erode brand equity, and make it impossible for the brand owner to manage the brand effectively. For the sake of growth, brand equity, and economies of scale, it makes sense to consider a centralized approach to your international marketing efforts. This is a set-up where strategy, protocols, infrastructure, and core communication are set in place centrally with input from local markets. Implementation and tactics are then handled locally. The recommendations in this guide are written assuming that you are opting, at least in part, for a centralized approach.

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TOP CHALLENGES OF BUILDING BRANDS ACROSS BORDERS

If it's the first time you are taking a brand abroad, you may feel that your biggest challenge will be translation. Language is the often most obvious difference between countries and getting it right is absolutely essential. That can be tricky, but with the right process in place and team supporting you, translation can be easily solved.

Beyond language, there are a number of more subtle differences that can significantly influence the effectiveness of your international marketing program. Ideally, your marketing staff and agency will be well versed in these differences so they can mitigate the risk they pose. Below is a table that explores some of the differences between domestic and international marketing. It also highlights many of the challenges beyond translation likely to be encountered. Use it to assess your situation before trying to select an international marketing agency.

DOMESTIC REALITY	INTERNATIONAL REALITY	CONSEQUENCE FOR MARKETING	REQUIREMENTS FOR MARKETING
Communicate in one language	Communicate in several languages	Good marketing communication does more than convey information. It motivates and inspires. These are often the first attributes to be killed in translation. To reduce this risk, create in English, then adapt (not translate) into required languages in such a way that it retains its motivational power in addition to reflecting local grammar, usage, and culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experience managing adaptation of marketing communication.• English-language copywriting by a writer experienced in cross-border campaigns.• Methodology to handle logistics and quality issues during adaptation.• Strong network of translators and adaptors.

DOMESTIC REALITY	INTERNATIONAL REALITY	CONSEQUENCE FOR MARKETING	REQUIREMENTS FOR MARKETING
Communicate to one cultural segment of your target group	Communicate to multiple cultural segments	The concept around which the communication is based must be culturally relevant and acceptable in all markets.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Methodology to understand local market and conduct cultural and language checks. Creatives who are experienced in producing concepts for multi-cultural use.
Fairly uniform consumer cultural references and behavior.	Different consumer cultural references and behavior for each market.	In addition to language, the wider cultural and behavioral aspects should be understood and reflected in all aspects of the strategy and execution.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Beyond translators, an entire team that is experienced in multi-cultural marketing that covers all aspects of strategy, tactics, and management.
Value proposition, position and profile were developed around domestic market, target, and competition so will work as-is.	Value proposition, position and profile were developed around domestic market, target, and competition so may not work at all.	Some parts of the strategy should change for each market and others should not. This requires a brand architecture designed for international marketing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brand architecture that supports international marketing. Brand strategist experienced in adapting brand and marketing strategies to local markets.
Brand-appropriate social and mobile platforms are known and relatively stable.	Brand-appropriate social and mobile platforms can vary from country to country and region to region.	Digital habits can vary with regard to which social platforms are used for which purposes. Mobile habits can also vary.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital strategist experienced in setting up and managing cross-border web presence.
SEO in general and search and social advertising in particular are fairly straightforward.	SEO in general and search and social advertising in particular will conform to the cultural habits and language of each market.	Individual SEO and search & social advertising plans will need to be developed for each market and language.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SEO and online advertising strategists who are used to dealing with cross-border strategies.
Receive approval and feedback from one marketing manager	Receive approval and feedback based on a consensus of several marketing managers	Politics comes into play as local marketing managers protect their turf. "This is great, but it won't work on my market," means "I don't believe in your approach. Let me do my own thing."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management routines and credentials to gain the respect and cooperation of the local market. Methodology to deal with multiple managers and still keep deadlines.

DOMESTIC REALITY	INTERNATIONAL REALITY	CONSEQUENCE FOR MARKETING	REQUIREMENTS FOR MARKETING
Campaign strategy unarticulated but understood by market manager and agency.	Campaign strategy must be articulated and “sold-in” for local markets to accept and work with the campaign.	A sound written strategy is essential to ensure the campaign addresses the complexities of the various markets and to sell in and instruct local market managers. Without this, the discussion quickly devolves into a highly subjective and inconclusive discussion of the creative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong strategic base clearly articulated. • Methodology for developing and distributing strategy. • Tactics for selling in creative.
Creative team can draw on local humor or word play to create impact.	Creative team cannot draw on local humor or word play to create impact.	Marcom must be based on concepts that are more universal in nature. The temptation is to create bland material that is easy to translate. This is a rookie mistake because it results in bland communication. Branding vs Blanding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skilled adaptors (not translators) for each language. • Creative teams that are experienced in producing work for adaptation. • Collaboration with adaptors during creative process.
Marketing manager is using a local ad agency they selected and have ongoing relationship with.	Marketing managers are having to use work from a foreign agency that they have no relationship with.	The lead agency must win the respect of the local client by demonstrating that they are capable of addressing the concerns of the local market and that they bring expertise that cannot be found on the local market.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operational set-up that rewards cooperation by local team. • Credentials to gain the respect of the local market. • Tactics for dealing with political issues. • Experience with global campaigns.
Marketing manager and agency can meet whenever.	Geography and budgets restrict meetings between agency and foreign marketing managers.	Agency must find ways to establish respect and have close working relationship with local markets, despite the inability to meet often.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovative use of internet and other media as well as planning to allow for frequent virtual and regular face-to-face meetings.
Market and competitive intelligence is easy to access.	Market and competitive intelligence is difficult to access.	Good marcom is based on insights gained through intelligence. Since few companies have a viable intelligence function in place, this information can be difficult to acquire.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centralized research and insight mining function. • Methodology for mining intelligence from the markets in a cost-effective manner. • Strategic planner experienced in this.

DOMESTIC REALITY	INTERNATIONAL REALITY	CONSEQUENCE FOR MARKETING	REQUIREMENTS FOR MARKETING
Market manager and agency will be exposed to the communication, as will their bosses, friends, and relatives.	HQ marketing manager and agency will often never be exposed to the communication.	Motivational issue. Easy for HQ marketing manager and agency to apply a different (lower) standard to work in foreign markets.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A team that is experienced in and dedicated to international work. • Standards defined in advance and adhered to. • Methodology to maintain control of marcom process in foreign markets.
Feedback on the success or failure of the campaign is immediate and apparent.	Feedback on the success or failure of the campaign is not apparent.	While data is available, the anecdotal, first-hand feedback from a campaign occurring on the other side of the planet is often missing. It helps if a methodology is in place to follow up on campaigns and extract the feedback from local markets.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methodology for mining feedback as well as data from markets to ensure a two-way flow of info between HQ and markets.

You may find that many of the “soft issues” in the list above will actually cause the most headaches as you begin to develop your brand internationally. All the more reason to seek the support of an international marketing agency that can provide you with a team that is experienced in creating and managing international marketing.

The extent to which any of the factors listed above will influence your marketing efforts depends on how your company is set up internationally. Companies that maintain some central control over local marketing budgets and marketers tend to fare better than those who don’t.



See [the Case Study of how this diet pill was launched across Europe](#).

Also, the type of product being marketed can make a big difference. Some products are far more prone to cultural differences than others. For instance, launching a weight-loss pill across Europe would be a lot more challenging than, say, launching bottled water. That’s because dietary habits and ideas about ideal weight and body image vary far more from country to country than attitudes related to water consumption. Both of these factors need to be assessed when making your choice.



FOUR TYPES OF INTERNATIONAL MARKETING AGENCIES

Enlisting the help of an agency to help you take your brand abroad is a logical first step for most companies. You could just Google “international advertising agency” and see what turns up. But what exactly is an international advertising agency? It’s difficult to tell because the title can be applied to such a wide variety of marketing agencies. So, let’s consider the four most obvious options available to scale your brand globally.

1. Use your domestic agency

This is perhaps the most tempting option because you have already invested in the relationship with your domestic agency and gotten them up to speed. The idea is to simply connect your domestic agency with a decent translation house and be done with it. This would work if language were the only

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challenge you would encounter. And, if it is, then this may be your best option.

However, chances are your success abroad will depend on many other factors, some of which are included in the table in the previous section. The

growth needs of mid-sized companies often exceed the reach of local generalist agencies who lack the strategic expertise to drive growth or the international perspective and experience to market across borders. Adding translation to that equation won’t help much.

2. Hire one large multi-national agency chain

If you are a large company with a large marketing department and budget, this is probably your best option. These are the chains that evolved from media brokerage houses and came to prominence serving and creating mega-brands during the Mad Men era. They have dominated and defined marketing practices ever since.

For small- to mid-sized companies who don't have P&G-sized budgets and resources, the large, well-known multi-national agency conglomerates may not provide the best value. They undoubtedly have the muscle and know-how to launch and manage brands globally. However, their pricing policies for those particular services tend to be ratcheted for large companies.

The real issue with these firms is the experience you will receive for your budget. Most people who are new to international marketing are surprised by the ironic fact that the individuals who populate the international networks, by and large, lack international expertise.

Unless you have the financial resources to marshall a global multi-agency team, you will find yourself dealing with an individual at the local level who has little or no experience marketing over borders. That's because large agency networks are not one big agency. Often, the only thing they have in common with their agency siblings in different countries is their accounting system.

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The most well-known networks are comprised of many different agencies with deep expertise serving their domestic market. Mid-sized firms should be mindful of the difference between owning agencies in many different countries and having people in those agencies who understand the intricacies of creating, implementing, and managing growth strategies cross-border.

3. Hire multiple local independent agencies in each market

Let's say you will be marketing in France, UK, and Germany. A mistake often made by American marketers is believing that a UK agency will be able to "cover the EU" in the same way a New York Agency might be able to "cover the

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US." It's important to remember that the EU is an economic region and not a cultural one. In most cases, your UK agency will not have any special competence marketing outside the United Kingdom. France, Germany, and every other country in the EU have their unique market situations and cultures. Given that, it might make

sense to simply hire three different agencies, one in each country. This is possible, but will require you to manage each one, which can be very time

consuming. There will also be a lot of overlap and reinventing of wheels between the agencies, which will drive up costs and drag down efficiencies. As the brand expands into other markets, the limitations of this approach become more obvious as the job of managing them all becomes overwhelming and ultimately ineffective.

4. Hire one independent agency specializing in international marketing.

No agency can have deep expertise in all 196 countries. However, one agency can have deep expertise in the methodology and resources required to enter and develop new markets. There are not many marketing agencies with this speciality (full disclosure: we're one of them). These agencies can serve as one point of contact for entire regions,

continents, or the entire world. They are experienced in setting up and managing international marketing initiatives with specialized skills, processes, and resources. They work in collaboration with a global network of proven experts across a range of disciplines including translation, adaptation, PR, creative, digital, media, and marketing strategy.

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For instance, in the case of Duffy Agency, our own network, in combination with our partners in TAAN Worldwide, allow us to help our clients market their brands globally. This solution can be highly efficient and cost effective. But, the real reason for enlisting this expertise is that it boosts the probability of success and buys time by avoiding the trial and error that is part of the process when working with less-specialized marketers.

Summary

Understanding the difference between domestic and international marketing challenges and recognizing the expertise required to address them is the first step in making an informed agency choice. We hope this guide has shed some light on the subject. Our quarterly newsletter provides further insights for the international marketer and you can [subscribe for free here](#). If you would like to discuss your situation in more detail, feel free to [contact Duffy Agency](#) directly.

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About

THE AUTHORS

This guide was written by the folks at Duffy Agency, a value-based, digital marketing agency that helps aspiring international brands achieve ambitious growth.

Founded in 2001, Duffy Agency is a part of Taan Worldwide. We have offices in Malmö, Sweden, and Boston, USA, with over 50 affiliated Taan Worldwide offices in major markets across six continents. Like conventional digital agencies, we create websites, apps, and online creative campaigns. But, before we do that work, we provide strategic brand development, digital strategy, and planning. We also follow through with web presence management and/or training to ensure that our work produces a business result. Why? Because with many of our clients, we are paid for the results we produce, not the time we spend. This approach aligns our financial interests and provides an exhilarating and effective working relationship.

Duffy Agency has worked with hundreds of international brands in over 45 different countries to help them achieve real growth through a combination of sound brand strategy and online marketing skills. Our approach removes silos and gets all online activities (e.g. websites, social, content, email, advertising) pulling in the same direction. This helps the companies we serve grow and engage their online audience faster and more cost-effectively.

There's plenty more we could tell you, so if this sounds like it may be useful for your business, get in touch. Visit www.duffy.agency for more details, or email bob@duffy.agency and you'll have the opportunity to engage firsthand with one of our partners.

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