

Chapter 8

Marketing Strategies for International Startups and SMEs

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the marketing approaches that global startups and SMEs use to address the internationalization process. They reveal the priorities of digital marketing, cultural changes, and partnerships as effective solutions to problems that often appear during the implementation of an international project, including scarcity of resources, language barriers, and legal constraints. Conducting a literature review based on major theories and researchers, this chapter highlights key approaches based on the use of technologies such as AI and digital platforms to deliver cost-effective and efficiently scalable marketing strategies. Best and worst practices of BMs of startups / SMEs are illustrated through case studies and an action plan 'GROWTH' is suggested to gain global marketing success. Finally, AI as a marketing tool, e-commerce, and sustainability as considerations in the future of international business are also discussed in this chapter.

Keywords

International marketing, Startups, SMEs, digital marketing, global expansion

1. Introduction

Globally, startups and SMEs are one of the most active and huge segments in the economy. Startups are mostly companies that have been founded recently, which should introduce new products or services into the market or develop new ways of delivering existing products and services with high growth rates but small capital, and sometimes, undefined positioning strategies (Aaker, 2012). On the other hand, SMEs are tribes of well-developed companies, which may work in many sectors of an economy but are not big, have lower growth rates, and are often described by the possibility of gradual vertical growth. Startups and SMEs play significant roles in innovation and employment in all global regions, especially emerging ones (O'Dwyer, Gilmore, & Carson, 2009).

Marketing is as important in SME internationalization as it is in the world of startups. Marketing strategies help business organizations cope with challenges facing businesses in international markets by building brand recognition, customer acquisition, and improving business competitive advantage (Chaffey & Smith, 2022). Despite the fact that marketing has proven to be a complex, cross-channel function using social media platforms and other digital marketing tools to bring international customers closer at lower costs (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Digital marketing functions as a valuable means of penetrating new markets by providing opportunities for new startups and SMEs to compete with large companies (Christensen, 1997).

This chapter focuses on the marketing management of startups and SMEs that decide to exit and function in international

markets. It outlines the ways in which companies use social media, such as digital marketing tools, countercultural marketing, and cultural brokering, to develop their marketing strategies. This chapter also explores the difficulties that startups and SMEs experience in their international marketing attempts and key success factors. This chapter provides an understanding of how international marketing theories and concepts have evolved and the importance of technological advancement and culture sensitivity for global business success (Hofstede, 1984; Lu & Beamish, 2001; Zhou, Wu, & Luo, 2007).

The objectives of this chapter are to identify the key marketing strategies of international startups and SMEs, the role of digital marketing in their internationalization process, and the barriers they face in adopting global marketing strategies. This chapter presents both theoretical insights and practical applications of international marketing strategies, including recent digital tools and global business practices.

2.Literature review

Several theoretical frameworks and empirical studies have examined international marketing strategies for startups and SMEs. Models of market expansion and differentiation strategies are derived from foundational theories such as Ansoff's matrix (1987) and Porter's Competitive Advantage (1985). According to Barney's (1991) resource-based view (RBV), firm-specific resources such as branding and organizational capabilities are crucial for maintaining a competitive edge. Johanson and Vahlne (2002) define the gradual internationalization of firms, whereas Knight and Cavusgil (2004) define global

as a concept that talks about newly organized firms (startups) that rapidly internationalize based on innovative and fast-growing technologies. SMEs face significant challenges, particularly financial constraints (Lu & Beamish, 2001), cultural differences (Hofstede, 1984), and regulatory barriers (Kogut & Singh, 1988). But technology has filled in some of the gaps. Importance of social media use (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), e-commerce (Kim & Peterson, 2017), and digital marketing (Chaffe & Smith, 2022) to SMEs in gaining global exposure is significant. The landscape of international marketing is also changing with the digital innovations such like AI (Patil et al., 2022) and

blockchain (Gröhn, 2017). However, in terms of AI advocates, the long-term effects of AI, the sustainability of global strategies, and special issues pertaining to SMEs in emerging markets remain unknown. However, some gaps have been filled by this technology. Some gaps have been filled by this technology. Social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), electronic commerce (Kim & Peterson, 2017), and digital marketing (Chaffe & Smith, 2022) are essential to SMEs' orientation to global visibility. Moreover, there is a new environment for global marketing emerging from advanced technologies like artificial intelligence (Patil et al., 2022) or blockchain (Gröhn, 2017).

Combined Table: Research Overview and Gaps

Year	Authors	Focus/Findings	Research Gap
1987	Ansoff & Andrews	Introduced corporate strategy frameworks for market growth, emphasizing penetration and diversification.	Limited focus on dynamic digital markets and rapid internationalization processes.
1991	Barney	Firm-specific resources and the Resource-Based View (RBV) as key to sustained competitive advantage.	Insufficient focus on the role of digital assets like AI, data, and customer insights in RBV.
1997	Christensen	Introduced the concept of disruptive innovation, emphasizing entry into established markets.	Lack of focus on digital and cultural applicability of disruptive innovation.
2001	Lu & Beamish	Identified financial constraints as a barrier to internationalization for SMEs.	Limited exploration of digital financing tools, such as crowdfunding or blockchain.
2002	Johanson & Vahlne	The Uppsala Model: gradual internationalization driven by experiential learning.	Model outdated for Born Globals and startups that rapidly internationalize using digital tools.

2004	Knight & Cavusgil	The Born Global concept: rapid internationalization by leveraging innovation and capabilities.	Insufficient attention to the role of social media in driving fast-track global expansion.
2007	Zhou et al.	The role of social networks in facilitating the internationalization of SMEs.	Lack of exploration into the digital social networks' role in driving international success.
2010	Kaplan & Haenlein	Social media's role in enhancing brand visibility and customer engagement on a global scale.	Limited insights into social media's long-term impact on customer loyalty and engagement.
2017	Gröhn	Digital innovations and their impact on startup marketing strategies for global growth.	Lack of focus on blockchain and its role in securing international transactions for SMEs.
2022	Chaffey & Smith	Optimizing digital marketing techniques to reach global audiences.	Limited exploration of SMEs' use of emerging digital tools such as AI and predictive analytics.
2023	Chen et al.	Digital marketing strategies for SMEs in the digital age and the challenges of entry.	Gaps in research regarding the ethical implications of AI and big data in international marketing.
2024	Olivieri & Testa	Social media strategies for startups in international markets, with a case study focus.	Need for longitudinal studies to assess the impact of social media over time in global marketing.

3. Global Marketing Environment

The international marketing environment plays an important role in determining how companies formulate and implement their marketing activities globally. An analysis of the global marketing environment indicates that it comprises the economic, legal/political, sociocultural, and technological systems that influence startups and SMEs.

Exchange rates, inflation and market volatility are among the most important factors that affect global economies within

a short span of time and influence marketing strategies. For instance, pricing and distribution are crucial factors that companies might adapt to economic imbalances within geographical locations (Kotabe & Helsen, 2022). Countries in emerging economies with high economic growth, especially Asia and Africa, are viable for international expansion, although the risks include volatile purchasing power (Gillespie & Swan, 2021). Furthermore, through trade liberalization, economies have encouraged regular market access by startups and SMEs through trade

agreements, although they are inclined towards divergent fiscal policies and market environments (Alon et al., 2020).

Cultural factors are one of the major factors that specify a choice, purchase, and attitude towards the brand. Many Hofstede's cultural dimensions imply that marketing communication should be culturally appropriate (Kotabe & Helsen, 2022). For example, self-actualization communication – that is, a focus on individual needs and aspirations – is ineffective in the context of collectivist cultures but effective in individualist cultures (Wichmann et al. 2022). This also eliminates the risk of misunderstanding communication and increases customer experience in international markets (Thiebaut and Miranda, 2024).

Legal influences affect the marketing function's general strategies through factors such as controls on trade, tariffs, and protection of intellectual property (Gillespie & Swan, 2021). This is due to the fact that compliance with the regulations helps to prevent realization of sanctions and maintain successful work with partners in foreign states. Further, political stability is an essential component of market attractiveness; an unstable political environment may discourage investment, regardless of potential market conditions (Alon et al., 2020). For instance, new ventures encounter difficulties in dealing with sophisticated institutional environments, especially in industries in the pharmaceutical and financial sectors (Kotabe & Helsen, 2022).

Technology has advanced, thus affecting global marketing. Using technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data analysis, organizations can better

understand consumer activity patterns and hence set up marketing strategies more effectively (Anwer et al., 2024). Something that is exciting for SMEs and startups is the fact that AI can predict consumer needs and behaviours, and hence improve the customer experience. Furthermore, the advancement of digital platforms and e-commerce has affected entry barriers in international markets, where small businesses can easily reach a wider market (Wichmann et al., 2022).

4. Marketing Challenges for International Startups and SMEs

Numerous factors threaten the operation and existence of international startups and SMEs in global markets. One of the most crucial challenges is the lack of sufficient funding and insufficient number of staff and personnel. Such organizations may not be able to set aside the large amount of capital and human resources required to support large-scale marketing initiatives or to maintain a strong global network. As noted by Gamage et al. (2020), scarce resources make SMEs seek efficient solutions, which usually focus on the present, with little regard for the future. This constraint can negatively impact their scope of operations and competitiveness as they battle with existing large multinational firms.

They (International marketing) are complicated by cultural and linguistic barriers. Businesses therefore need different communication strategies for different audiences because they differ in language, values, and consumer behaviour. According to Chen et al. (2023), cultural sensitivity is key for startups to avoid alienation that damages their brand image. Similarly, Sanayee and Jalolovich (2021)

noted that the absence of cultural understanding is likely to contribute to ineffective market entry strategies and unsuccessful efforts to establish customer trust.

Another significant challenge in highly competitive global markets is the establishment of a brand. The importance of differentiation is that startups and SMEs have to find ways to differentiate themselves from the large competitors with 'famous' names and large marketing budgets. However, Olivieri and Testa (2024) claim that innovative digital marketing techniques exist: social media platforms, among others, can really work if they have expertise and adapt. Growth opportunities are lower for firms that are not easily seen or trusted in highly saturated markets.

The complexity of the legal and regulatory landscape of international markets presents a challenge for start-ups and SMEs. However, there are many legal requirements in each country to which any country has to adhere, which often depend on special knowledge and infrastructure. As stated by Nirmala et al. (2024), small business owners should understand the regulatory requirements to comply with the rules and effectively manage the business. Nonetheless, most startups have little resources for right making and penalty or disruption. The business might be new in the global marketplace therefore, other barriers may occur whenever business people lack the required knowledge of international business, as argued by Naradda Gamage et al. (2020).

The challenges that international startups and SMEs experience include resource limitations, cultural and linguistic barriers,

brand establishment, and regulatory complexities. To solve these issues, innovative approaches, flexibility, and thorough knowledge of global market dynamics are required for sustainable success.

5. Strategic Marketing Pathways for International Startups and SMEs

Building brand awareness and differentiating oneself to attract and retain consumers is still a key focus of enterprises, especially startups and SMEs, in the global market. There are several big strategies, one of which is to increase a company's utilization of digital marketing techniques that provide numerous ways of targeting customers at a relatively low cost. The most common forms of social media advertising include Instagram and LinkedIn for advertising purposes. Customer engagement involves the use of emails and content marketing. Olivieri and Testa (2024) indicate that startups can create brand awareness and foster consumer engagement through the use of efficient and effective digital platforms.

One important promotional strategy is the adaptation of products, services, and promotional campaigns to the local culture to capitalize on the psychological impact that a product may have on a culture. The advertisements are made much more relevant to the demographic and cultural differences involved in the marketing process. Chen et al. (2023) suggests that localization builds confidence, in this case, creates channels for SMEs to go through to break barriers of the new market and improve the brand image. Cultural differences in the marketing process

significantly increase the relevance of advertisements.

Therefore, global marketing depends on cooperative strategies. Startups can partner with local businesses, influencers and distributors who have already built a network and this method becomes more credible, especially when entering a new market. According to Nirmala et al. (2024), partnerships assist in accelerating the pace of market entry and offer opportunities for additional growth.

Startups can often afford to utilize guerrilla marketing and word-of-mouth strategies with limited budgets. By using these methods, businesses can run high-impact campaigns that make little or no investment to create buzz and receive some attention for our product. Gamage et al. (2020) provide examples of startups succeeding in generating significant results through unconventional and innovative marketing measures.

Finally, by focusing on niche segments, SMEs can occupy the market share of underserved or special markets. Such an arrangement enables businesses to dive into the global market with something unique to offer – something that addresses a unique consumer need and provides a unique solution. As Sanayee and Jalolovich (2021) show, startups can prioritize key customer loyalty by narrowing their focus and reducing competition.

6. Case Studies on International Marketing Strategies for Startups and SMEs

As it understands how startups and SMEs proceed with their international marketing strategies, it shows that they face certain

complexities in expanding their businesses out of their local markets. This study consists of four separate case studies that examine the international marketing strategy adopted by startups and SMEs and their approaches and challenges. Each case study illustrates the different markets in which these companies compete and how they deal with the specific challenges associated with these markets, enabling them to grow in global markets.

6.1. Social Media as a Key to International Marketing Success: Olivieri and Testa (2024)

Olivieri and Testa (2024) examined how startups and SMEs use social media platforms in international marketing strategies. In studying multiple case studies in which firms have extended their reach beyond domestic borders using platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn, the study looks at different factors both within the firm and outside. These companies (both startups and SMEs) found that they have already been able to use digital platforms for branding, customer engagement, and direct sales on a global scale. The success of these projects was driven by a localization approach thus, they localized content in a manner that clearly reflected customer preferences and helped boost customer trust. However, the research also had drawbacks such as managing social media advertising on paid social media, which can be complicated, and the viral nature of algorithms.

6.2. International Strategy Formation in Canadian High-Tech Firms: Spence (2003)

Spence (2003) analysed the international strategies of small- and medium-sized high-

tech companies in Canada. In addition, research highlights how some SMEs and startups capitalize on global market opportunities through the development of strategic partnerships, the utilization of government support programs, and product innovation. For example, a high-tech SME uses trade shows to network and forge alliances with international partners, whereas a start-up aims for product rapidity for international demand. Finally, this study examines the strategic value of resource-sharing between startups and SME, such as technology, distribution channels, and access to the market. As a result, however, firms face complexities in complying with international regulations and competition from larger and more established players.

6.3. Causes of Startup and SME Failures in Bangalore: Kalyanasundaram (2018)

Kalyanasundaram (2018) analysed the causes of failure for startups and SMEs in Bangalore. This study uses an empirical analysis based on a case study to identify the common pitfalls that firms encounter when they are trying to expand internationally. Continuing with this example, an SME expanded to foreign markets without adequate market research, which led to poor sales and miserly financial investment, while technology began to collapse without sufficient financial capital or appropriate cash flow tracking. The problems of entering new international markets, being confronted with cultural and linguistic barriers, and management of operational scaling are common for these types of firms. The research concludes that such failures can be avoided if better market understanding,

financial discipline, and stronger legal frameworks are employed.

6.4. Collaboration Driving Innovation in Swiss Startups and SMEs: Mercandetti et al. (2017)

Mercandetti et al. (2017) analyse how innovation collaborations between startups and small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) build up in Switzerland. Research on how startups and SMEs jointly collaborate to overcome resource constraints and reach international markets quickly sheds light on the shape of this alliance, what it is providing to its members, and how it is regulated. For instance, a startup and an SME in the pharmaceutical industry team co-create a new product for the international market using the startup's innovation, coupled with the SME's industry expertise and network of distribution. The second example explains how an SME is linked to a fintech startup to help the new digital payment system integrate into the SME's service. These kinds of collaborations have helped startups and SME's grow fast and become massive global players. It became apparent from the study that managing partnerships is not an easy task, especially when there is a rift between the Company Culture and Organizational Goals.

7. Proposed Model: The "GROWTH" Framework for Global Marketing Success of Startups and SMEs

GROWTH Framework, a holistic and strategic model, balances the complexities of global marketing experienced by startups and SMEs. Based on the key marketing principles, this framework aims at

providing a competitive advantage to the startups and SMEs in various markets consistent with the current dynamics of international business.

The GROWTH acronym stands for the following stages:

G: Starting with Global Market Research and Insights, The GROWTH Framework begins with Global Market Research & Insights. The topic emphasizes the need to carry out detailed studies on local international markets to comprehend consumer behaviour with regard to the competitive landscape and industry trends in those markets and to encourage the start-up of companies and SMEs. Companies use data analytics and market intelligence tools to determine where and how to enter new markets and to factor this into their strategy successfully (Kotabe & Helsen, 2022). Local preferences, not to mention emerging opportunities, will be, at least, a necessary cushion for successful market penetration.

R: Robust Digital platforms are used to develop a Robust Digital Marketing Strategy, which is effective and highly scaled. Social media marketing, content creation, and digital advertising can be conducted for startups and SMEs with the objective of gaining visibility and engagement from a global audience. On the other hand, the ability to enlarge the power of SEO, email campaigns, data driven and content strategies allows us to successfully target the potential customers across the borders with consistent brand messages and accounting for the local significance (Chaffey & Smith, 2022). Developing a solid digital strategy is vital to long term success in international markets.

O: Organizational Cultural & Adaptation This stage focuses on adapting

organization's marketing campaign, products and services to fit the culturally and regionally preferred markets in a detailed manner. As an international business, if you know the role that cultural diversity can play in consumer behaviour and decision-making, you have succeeded. Hofstede (1984) suggests that this can involve product and brand offerings and their communications alongside how they are marketed to be culturally relevant in terms of people's preferences. Building brand authenticity and customer loyalty in local partnerships can include collaboration with regional influencers or distributors.

W: Winning Partnerships & Networking Winning Partnerships & Networking focuses on how forming strategic partnerships helps startup/SMEs reach global markets. Working with local businesses, influencers, and distributors boosts brand visibility and market penetration. If you decide to enter the market, networking with other international companies or industry organizations can open your eyes to what is happening in the market, what customers expect, and what regulatory requirements are. In addition, partnerships with these organizations allow startups and SMEs to be better armed and prepared to enter foreign markets (Spence, 2003).

T: Targeting niche markets and innovation are all about recognizing and conquering submarkets or specialization areas. Innovation and differentiation are vital for startups and SMEs to succeed, because they compete in saturated markets. Small businesses remain focused on their audiences that are not particularly attractive to large firms thus, they can create the most trustful, long-term partnership and become leaders in certain domains. In addition, it is

wise to emphasize that this strategy of constant innovation enhances the ability to overcome change forces and customer forces in the market, thereby offering sustainability of competitive advantage (Christensen, 1997).

H: Holistic Customer Experience & Retention The final stage in our proposed model is Holistic Customer Experience & Retention, which are factors in the need to provide the customer with quality experience across the customer-interface continuum. Even during the first contact,

follow-up, sales, after-sale services, and care, startups and SMEs should compete by finding ways to bond with customers. Finally, there is the notion that it involves the use of customer information, and data analysis, and CRM applications to guide the understanding of the customer need and how she can be retained from time to time. Customer loyalty can reduce customer churn rates and allow organizations to gain the maximum lifetime value of their customers because clients' preferences are met frequently (Kim & Peterson, 2017).



Fig. 1 Conceptual Diagram by Authors

8. Future Trends in International Marketing

Several trends are characterized as evolving in the field of international marketing and defining its future. Some of the major triggers are artificial intelligence (AI) and

data-driven marketing. Technology in general and AI have specifically introduced one of the biggest changes in the marketing field by offering the ability to have better techniques for data analysis and allow businesses to make better decisions based

on real-time data. Sajili et al. (2024) reported that the use of AI in marketing has resulted in effective personalized marketing experiences, better-targeted ads, and more accurate predictions of consumer behaviour. The change in focus from traditional advertising to digital marketing enables a business firm to capture exactly what its customers need, while simultaneously noticing the future trends that would help shape its strategies, as endorsed by Rosário and Dias (2023).

The second reason is the expansion of e-commerce in large markets. Where online shopping platforms have developed rapidly, new ways exist for businesses to obtain customers through regions, including emerging markets. The authors also discuss the necessity of regional strategies for e-commerce expansion, where Ferguson and Yen (2006) state that e-commerce businesses must adapt their models to local market conditions. Customization of websites, payment systems, and marketing campaigns for customers across various segments. Bourlier and Gomez (2016) noted that, as e-commerce continues to expand, companies must adapt to strategies to assimilate local preferences with global scalability.

It is also becoming central to international marketing strategies, as sustainability and ethical considerations have become more relevant. Sustainability and ethical practices are becoming increasingly important for consumers regarding the choices they make as shoppers. According to Tanveer et al. (2021), ethical marketing is important because it helps customers develop brand loyalty and has a good relationship with a business, provided their environment matches consumers' values. This shift urges companies to carry out

sustainable practices in what they're doing in sourcing raw materials and how they can cut down carbon footprints. Furthermore, as discussed by Weber (2013), marketing curricula are changing to address ethical, social, and sustainability issues, which are gaining greater prominence in global business practice. Integrating sustainability into marketing will attract conscientious consumers, but more importantly, companies that can integrate sustainability into their marketing strategies will allow them to build a stronger and more resilient brand in an increasingly competitive international market.

Future international marketing will transform as AI advances, e-commerce grows, and strong trends in sustainability and ethics emerge. For these businesses to adjust to this, they must adapt to new technology, tailor their strategies to local markets, and adapt to consumer ethical values. Such trends are necessary for companies to compete on the global marketplace.

9. Conclusion

The international marketing strategies for startups and SMEs are dynamic, cannot be planned too well, and need to be adaptable to the dynamics of international markets. However, these businesses face challenges such as limited resources, cultural barriers, and regulatory hurdles, and need to be innovative, including the use of digital tools, local partnerships, and specific products and markets. With the help of the "GROWTH" framework, we can have a structured model to achieve sustainable success in international expansion, researching new markets, digital marketing materials and localization, setting up

partnerships, niche targeting, and customer retention. As AI, e-commerce, and sustainability increasingly influence the global marketing environment, startups and SMEs must naturally integrate them into their strategy to remain competitive and relevant in shifting market environments.

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