



SALES

SUPPORT

Export sales can be a vital lifeline to companies, but the process of selling in new markets isn't always so straightforward. For the past four years, the International Selling Programme has been giving businesses best practice guidance to avoid the pitfalls when entering uncharted territory. Adam Maguire hears from some of the participants.

As Irish companies seek to offset local losses by improving their international performance, any advantage they hold could be the difference between success and failure. However, with competition only increasing, such an edge can often be hard to find.

For the past four years, Enterprise Ireland has attempted to remedy this through its International Selling Programme. It aims to give companies the tried-and-tested tools needed to sell better outside of Ireland, be it through better awareness of their strengths or greater understanding of the markets they seek to enter.

Since 2006, the scheme – which is run in partnership with the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) – has been undertaken by over 300 executives across a range of industries. With applications now open for the next year of the programme, *The Market* speaks to three alumni from the class of 2008 to see what impact their involvement has had on their companies' development.

CUSTOMER FOCUS Since its formation, Voicesage has targeted international customers but according to director of sales Mark Oppermann, the International Selling Programme has helped the company better identify its ideal client.

Voicesage offers an automated voice and text message service that it says is interactive and, most importantly, human. It runs on a software as a service model and charges on a per-transaction basis, installing and managing the system itself at no cost to the customer.

“Our main marketplace is the UK, Europe and Northern America but it is primarily UK-based,” says Oppermann. “Our client base would be very large business consumer-type operations that invariably have a large contact centre which we would aim to automate fully or partially.”

Oppermann has a long background in sales and he undertook the programme expecting it to be interesting, if not significantly influential in terms of how he did business. However, very quickly he found it to be effective in focusing attention on the company's real goals.

“As a small start-up, you're brutally desperate for revenue. What happens is you get sucked into becoming very busy thinking you're making progress but in actual fact you have to work just as hard for less revenue.”

Through the programme, Voicesage identified the key characteristics of its ideal client. Since then, it has focused more on making those kinds of deals rather than chasing a larger number of smaller agreements. “I also realised that technology people often love to talk about technology when all the customer wants to hear is the potential benefit to them,” he says. “That was another thing – how do you verbalise your company proposition?”

Over the past 18 months, Oppermann reckons the improved focus has added €1m in potential sales to Voicesage. It continues to work with companies like the ESB, British Gas and AXA Insurance and has an ever-growing relationship with NHS Trusts in the UK.

“If anything, I would say the title of the programme doesn't really capture what it covers – it doesn't do it justice,” he says.

SEND ME A POSTCARD The different selling techniques required for different markets was a key learning curve for Geoff Scargill, export manager with John Hinde Ltd. For him, the company – which specialises in personalised gifts, tourism and novelty items – had been selling in a very Irish way until 2008.

“Without wanting to be offensive, I think I was selling like a paddy until then,” he says. “I was only selling the way I knew and I wanted to - this course really made me shift my axis in those terms.” He applauds the practical nature of the course, saying each lesson had a basis in reality and not just theory. This included having buyers come in to see an individual’s sales techniques and give advice based on what they look for in the real world.

It also featured lessons on the cultural differences that companies may encounter as they go from place to place and has helped him to strike deals in Italy, Romania and Singapore since. This is a significant departure from where the company was at before 2008 when, according to Scargill, exports were a minor part of their bottom line.

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“Export sales used to be an added bonus for us but they’re now a fundamental part of the company’s survival and our future growth and prosperity,” he says. “Because of challenges on the domestic front, export sales have become a lifeline and their percentage of sales has probably trebled since 2007. The course was an intrinsic part of us shifting our focus to where we have it now.”

Scargill says the people who delivered modules on the course all had real-world experience and reputation, which helped add credibility to what they were saying. He has also taken part in some of the follow-on alumni days which he says were well run and always helpful in terms of adding value.

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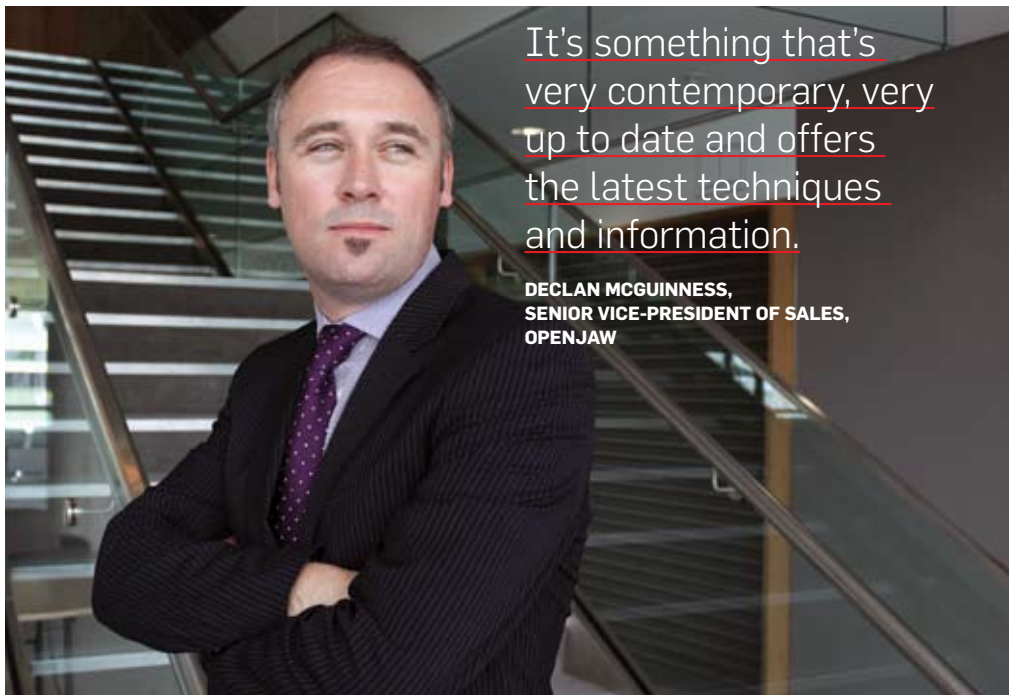
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LEFT; GEOFF SCARGILL, EXPORT MANAGER, JOHN HINDE LTD AND TONINO CAPPIELLO, OWNER, CREMS



It's something that's very contemporary, very up to date and offers the latest techniques and information.

**DECLAN MCGUINNESS,
SENIOR VICE-PRESIDENT OF SALES,
OPENJAW**

TRAVEL BROADENS THE MIND Specialising in the software technology behind the travel industry has meant that OpenJaw has had no choice but to think internationally from day one.

By the time it undertook the programme in 2008, only 2 per cent of the company's business originated in Ireland, according to senior vice-president of sales Declan McGuinness. However, that does not mean the firm did not benefit from taking part.

"There was experience at senior level of doing deals in the export markets, but in terms of things like understanding value propositions, competitive differentiations, market entry strategy and so on, there was lots of experience but it wasn't formalised."

McGuinness says he saw the programme as a route to formalising the knowledge that he and others in the company already had. He also saw it as a way of learning current international best practice when it came to selling. The opportunity to undertake the course came just at the right time as many of its modules fitted in

with OpenJaw's operating plan at that time.

"We wanted to implement a CRM (customer relationship management) solution and an opportunity management pipeline solution and that came along at the same time as the programme," he says. "So we implemented modules from the programme practically immediately – it ran parallel with our own growth plans."

McGuinness adds that the course content was extremely relevant to the real business world. He attributes a lot of this relevance to the experience its lecturers had, which he describes as "compelling". He also says having an experienced businessman act as a personal advisor throughout the course further grounded everything they did in practicality.

"It upped our game significantly in terms of our ability to sell better," he says. "It's something that's very contemporary, very up to date and offers the latest techniques and information in these areas. You suddenly feel like the guy in America who you're competing with might not be as skilled as you are."

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE

The objective of the International Selling Programme is to provide proven and practical selling tools and techniques to participants via modules delivered by international sales experts. Each participant is also supported by an experienced business advisor who engages with the individual as programme milestones are completed. Throughout the course of the programme, participants will significantly enhance their sales capability and professionalism and the ultimate programme output is a cohesive export-led sales strategy for their company.

Since 2006, 230 people have graduated from the programme, which currently has 80 participants. Feedback from past participants indicates that the programme has had a significant impact upon sales performance, leading to increased revenues in export markets.

The next International Selling Programme will be delivered between January and November 2011 and applications will be accepted until October 30th 2010. Funding towards participant fees will be available for Enterprise Ireland client companies. For more details, contact Sarah Buckley on 01 727 2527 or email internationalselling@enterprise-ireland.com. Or you can apply online at www.enterprise-ireland.com/internationalselling