

Pinball wizard

learns from mistakes


AT CHICAGO-BASED EISENHART GAMES, Daryl Vincenti is known as the 'export wizard'. Over the last three years, the pinball machine manufacturer has developed a profitable new market in the Middle East. 'Times are hard for pinball in the US,' says Vincenti. 'Competition from video games and computers has hit small manufacturers like us really hard, so we have to find new markets.' Eisenhart now has some 35% of a growing Middle East market, but it hasn't been easy. 'We made a lot of mistakes at the beginning,' confesses Vincenti, 'but we learned fast. We're now starting to work in S E Asia, and things are much easier because we've taken important lessons on board in the Middle East.'

Vincenti puts using a good credit agency at the top of his lessons learned list. 'When you've invested time, effort and money in making an export sale, you want to get paid! After wasting a lot of time chasing payments, a friend introduced me to Nehling and Hynes. We learned that by using a credit agency to check out your customer's creditworthiness and to insure against non-payment, you can make export virtually risk-free.'

Other lessons learned centred on adaptability. 'Be flexible: you have to learn to think outside the box,' says Vincenti. 'And don't assume that what works well in your domestic market will automatically go down well in another. You should also be prepared to modify your product specifications to meet local conditions, and to focus on different aspects of the marketing mix. In the Middle East, for example, price is not everything. We started out trying to sell on price: we soon learned that over there, image, quality and service are all more important.'

Vincenti also stresses that would-be exporters should make a firm commitment to export, but focus on one market, rather than trying to sell all over the world. 'You don't succeed in export markets by giving them a couple of hours a week when things are slow at home. You have to put in a lot of time, get out there and meet your customers, and manage your local distributors proactively – if you don't, it's "game over" Eisenhart learned the hard way when they signed an exclusive deal with an agent in the Gulf; at the end of the first year, sales were zero, and the agent had disappeared without trace.'

A final lesson is to remember that appearances can be deceptive, warns Vincenti: 'One day we received a 15-word fax in approximate English from what seemed to be one man and a camel somewhere out in the desert. We thought it was a joke, but a week later we decided we should answer it anyway. They're now our biggest customer.'



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