GO-TO-MARKET & PRICING

When a proven playbook meets a new market.

The motion that worked at home crosses the border intact. The market position it was quietly standing on does not – and that is the whole problem.

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MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

A go-to-market playbook is two things: a sequence of moves, and the market position those moves were standing on. Only the sequence is written down, and only the sequence crosses a border. The research points the same way — Johanson and Vahlne revised their own model in 2009 to put outsidership, not distance, at the root of the uncertainty, and O'Grady and Lane found that of thirty-two Canadian retailers entering the United States, seven were operating successfully. Similar markets are not the easy ones; they are the ones where the checking gets skipped. The recoverable part is knowing which of your wins at home began with something you do not yet have abroad.

Keywords: Market entry · Cross-border go-to-market · Liability of outsidership · Psychic distance · International expansion

The scene is a composite, and anyone who has run an expansion will recognise it. Quarter two in the new country. Same deck, same discovery questions, same qualification bar, same sequence that has produced predictable pipeline at home for three years. Pipeline is running at a third of what the model said. Someone points out that the reps are still ramping. Someone else says it is early. The meeting ends with a decision to increase activity.

That decision is wrong, and it is wrong for a reason worth naming precisely. A playbook is a sequence of moves plus the market position those moves were standing on — and only the sequence crosses the border.

Everything written in the playbook document travels. Almost nothing the playbook document assumes does.

What a playbook is actually made of

Two components. Only one of them is written down.

The sequence is written down. Who to contact, in what order, with what message, against what qualification bar, with what proof at which stage, with what handover between marketing and sales. This is the artefact. It is what gets exported, translated and rolled out, and it is genuinely portable — the logic of a good discovery call does not change at a border.

The position is not written down, because it was not something anyone sat down and decided. It is the accumulated residue of everything the company did before the playbook existed:

1. Reference customers the buyer already recognises — names in the buyer's own segment and country that make a claim credible without argument.
2. A category the buyer already believes in. At home you may have spent years establishing that the problem is worth a budget line. Abroad that argument starts at zero.
3. A price the market has already anchored. Willingness to pay is not a property of the product; it is a property of what the buyer has previously paid for things they file in the same mental drawer. That drawer is a comparison set the buyer assembled before you arrived, and at home you are in it; in the new market it was filled by whoever got there first.
4. Third parties who take the call — analysts, journalists, community organisers, the two consultants the industry keeps asking.
5. Partners who route deals without being asked, because routing them has worked before.

Strip those five away and the sequence is still perfectly good advice. It is simply advice for a company that does not exist yet in that market.

The field moved its own answer

The standard account of international expansion is nearly fifty years old. In 1977 Jan Johanson and Jan-Erik Vahlne described internationalisation as a process of learning: their model, they wrote, "focuses on the gradual acquisition, integration and use of knowledge about foreign markets and operations, and on the incrementally increasing commitments to foreign markets." Knowledge comes from operating, and commitment rises as knowledge does. The reading that followed — summarised later by Shawna O'Grady and Henry Lane, who note that researchers "suggest that psychically close countries are more easily understood than distant ones; and offer more familiar operating environments" — was that firms should start where the market feels close, because closeness is cheaper to learn.

What makes this interesting is what the same two authors did with it later. In a 2009 revision of their own model, Johanson and Vahlne moved the obstacle. The business environment, they wrote, "is viewed as a web of relationships, a network, rather than as a neoclassical market with many independent suppliers and customers." And then the sentence that belongs at the top of an expansion plan:

> **Outsidership, in relation to the relevant network, more than psychic distance, is the root of uncertainty.**

Read the hedge carefully, because it is theirs and it is load-bearing: more than, not instead of. Cultural and institutional distance did not stop mattering. But on their revised account the binding constraint is not that the market is different. It is that you are outside it.

That reframing is useful precisely because it is unflattering. "The market is different" is a problem you can hire a consultant to explain. "We are outside the network" is a description of your own position, and it says what is missing is standing.

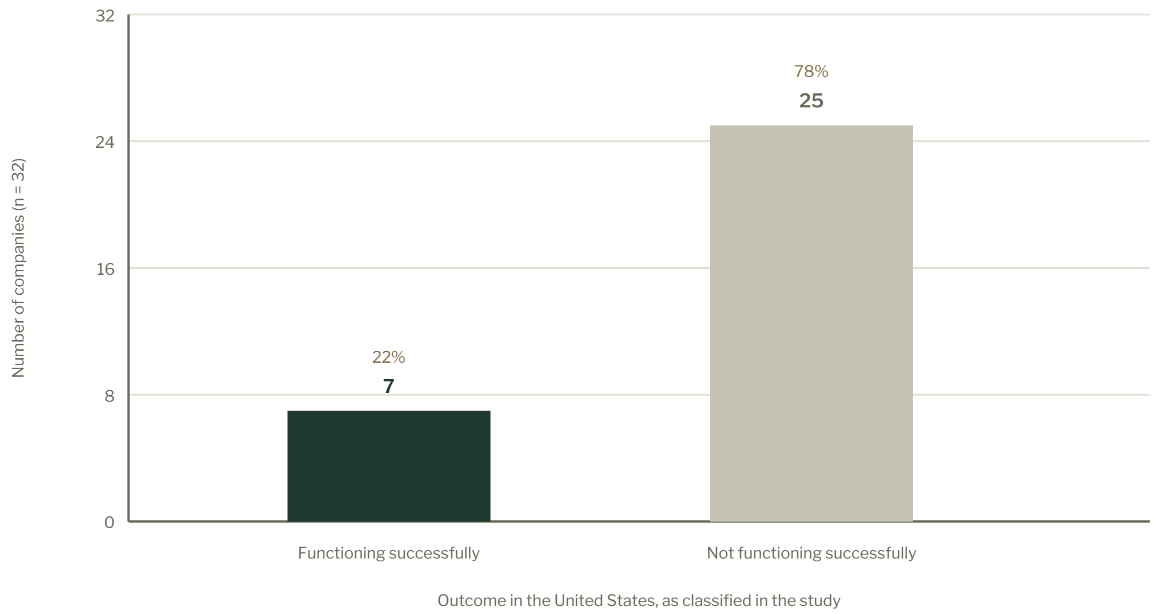
The trap is the market that looks easy

If distance were the whole story, the safest expansion would be the one into the most familiar market. The best-known test of that idea found something close to the opposite.

Shawna O'Grady and Henry Lane studied Canadian retailers entering the United States — about as short a hop as international expansion offers. Of thirty-two companies, seven were functioning successfully. Their explanation is the part that matters:

> **The psychic distance paradox is that operations in psychically close countries are not necessarily easy to manage, because assumptions of similarity can prevent executives from learning about critical differences.**

Figure 1 Canadian retailers operating in the United States, by outcome



O'Grady & Lane (1996), Journal of International Business Studies 27(2), as reported in the paper's abstract. Retail sector, Canada to the United States. Counts, not rates — this is one sample in one industry and one market pair.

The mechanism they name is the assumption of similarity — a different thing from similarity itself, and a much better piece of news, because an assumption can be audited and a border cannot be moved.

It is worth being careful about what this study is. Thirty-two Canadian retailers in one period is not a base rate for anything else, and the authors were refining the psychic-distance concept rather than demolishing it. But the shape of the finding survives the caveats: the market that looks like home is the one where the checking gets skipped, and the checking is the work.

For anyone operating out of Europe the equivalents are easy to name and easier to underestimate. Germany into Austria. Germany into Switzerland. Anywhere in the DACH region into the Netherlands. The UK or the US into Germany on the theory that enterprise buyers all work in English anyway — which is true of the language. The procurement process, the reference expectations, the role of the works council in a rollout, and how long "we will come back to you" means are all local.

Being foreign has a cost – and what you brought from home is part of the answer

There is a second finding worth holding alongside this, because it stops the argument collapsing into "adapt everything".

Srilata Zaheer tested whether foreign firms carry a measurable penalty, in about the most controlled setting available: twenty-four paired foreign-exchange trading rooms of major Western and Japanese banks in New York and Tokyo, doing near-identical work under near-identical conditions. Her results, she reported, “support the existence of a liability of foreignness and the role of a firm’s administrative heritage in providing competitive advantage.”

Both halves matter. Being foreign costs something real. And what the firm carried in from home — its own way of working — showed up as an advantage. A trading room is a long way from a modern software go-to-market, and the study is from 1995; what transfers is the direction, and the magnitude stays with the study. But it cuts against the reflex that says the answer to a stalled expansion is to become as local as possible as fast as possible. The sequence was fine.

What crosses and what does not

Table 1 What crosses the border, and what has to be rebuilt

Component of the playbook	Crosses the border	What has to be rebuilt locally
Discovery questions and qualification bar	Yes, essentially intact	Nothing — this is the portable core
Message and positioning logic	The logic yes, the wording no	The category argument, where the category is not yet believed
Proof and references	No	Named customers in the buyer’s own segment and country
Price and packaging	The structure, not the level	The anchor the buyer compares against, which is local
Channel and partner routing	No	Standing with partners who have no reason to know you
Buying process and timeline	No	The actual approval path, which is institutional, not cultural

Author’s own classification.

The right-hand column is the real expansion plan. In my experience it is consistently longer than the plan that was approved, and that gap is the one worth arguing about before the quarter starts rather than during it.

The obvious objection

Companies do expand successfully with a repeatable motion — seven of those thirty-two did, and the whole point of a playbook is that some of it generalises. The claim here is narrower and more useful: the part of your home performance that came from position rather than execution does not travel, it is invisible in the playbook document precisely because it was accumulated rather than decided, and a plan that does not account for rebuilding it will read as an execution problem for two or three quarters before anyone names it correctly.

This is also why the instinctive response — more activity — makes things worse rather than merely failing to help. Activity is the right instrument for a flow problem and the wrong one for a stock problem, which is the distinction between work that accumulates and work that resets at the centre of everything else here. Market position is a stock. You cannot buy back the years in which it was built at home, and you cannot substitute call volume for it abroad.

What to do about it this week

One exercise, and it takes an afternoon.

Take your last ten closed-won deals in the home market. For each one, write down the single thing that made the first meeting possible. A referral from an existing customer. An inbound from someone who had already heard of you. A partner who passed it over. A reference call with a name the buyer knew. An analyst mention. Whatever actually opened the door — not the campaign it was later attributed to.

Then, for each of those ten, ask one question: does that thing exist in the new market today?

Count the yeses. That number is the honest estimate of what your playbook is worth over there right now. If it is two out of ten, you do not have an execution problem in month six. You have eight doors that have to be built before the sequence has anything to run on, and the plan should say so and be funded accordingly.

Figure 2 **The ten doors**

THE DEAL Closed-won, at home.	WHAT OPENED THE DOOR Referral, inbound, partner, reference, analyst.	DOES IT EXIST THERE? In the new market, today.	IF NO, WHAT BUILDS IT The first customer, partner or analyst.

Ten deals. Count the yeses. That number, not the pipeline forecast and not the headcount, is what the playbook is worth in the new market today.

Author's own worksheet.

The number is also the thing to move. Rebuilding position is slow, and it is concrete: the first three reference customers, the first partner who routes without being asked, the first analyst who takes the call. Those are legible, they are trackable, and they compound. Pipeline in month four resets.

The uncomfortable part of Johanson and Vahlne's revision is that it makes the problem yours rather than the market's. Outsidership is not a property of the country. It is a description of where you stand in it — and standing is earned the same slow, cumulative way abroad as it was at home, where it accumulated so gradually that it never got written down.

The message crosses the border. The years stay where they were earned.

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END OF ESSAY

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