



Entrepreneurs Corner

By Victoria Ingalls

Shana Schlossberg, Founder & CEO of social concierge platform EZBZ opens up as to the challenges of being an entrepreneur leading a technology driven services company and working across international boundaries, markets and cultures. At www.myEZBZ.com, users post whenever they need a product or service, and responses are generated in the form of competitive bids from local businesses.

1. For CEOs like yourself, what's the most important aspect of branching out to international markets?

Years ago when I first visualized the concept of EZBZ, I saw it as an amazing tool that can revolutionize global trade. What if you can buy precious stones from India or textiles from China without using a broker – by just messaging every supplier in that country? What if I can reserve a guesthouse in Thailand directly from its owners who may not be listed on one of the travel sites? EZBZ's goal is to facilitate global commerce for consumers and connect them directly with local businesses across the world who can sell and market their goods and services without relying on third party brokers.

2. How long ago did you decide to expand EZBZ's reach outside of the United States? What factors influenced your decision to expand internationally?

My decision to expand started just over 1 year ago. At the time, we were having first discussions with potential partners in the Middle East and Asia. I always knew I wanted to take EZBZ internationally, but knowing the challenges we would face, I really wanted to do it right.

3. In your experience, what do you see as the number one obstacle facing companies that want to branch out into the global marketplace?

There is a misconception that in today's digital world every online company can operate internationally with little additional effort. Although this can be true for a lucky few, such as social media companies driven by user generated content (Twitter, Instagram and Facebook), the majority of companies that try to launch in a new country fail. The primary reason for this is the tremendous financial investment and effort needed to succeed in another country. Too often the company's leaders and resources become overextended; while trying to focus attention on the new country, they are still needed significantly on the first, ultimately decreasing the impact they are able to have on either. After time, these resources become drained to critical levels and strain the business.

4. What processes assisted EZBZ in figuring out which markets would be best for international expansion?

It is a no-brainer that an American company should expand first to another English speaking country. Although we looked at

opportunities in Europe and Asia, Canada seemed the most logical starting point since it is a natural extension of the US market. However, I really wanted to test two different countries, and due to interest from multiple countries in the Middle East, we focused there. In the end we settled on Israel since after only two weeks of discovery, we managed to line up powerful joint ventures with some of the country's largest companies – including its major electric company, one of the country's largest banks and its largest television station. What we are learning from these two countries is now helping us plan our expansion for the next two years.

5. When EZBZ decided to branch out to international markets including Canada and Israel, how long did it take for you to establish roots in these markets?

In Canada, it took us less than 2 weeks to identify our local operator and 4 more to complete the technology adjustments and set up the initial six joint ventures with which we would launch the country. In Israel it took us longer to identify the best operator, but the joint ventures closed more quickly. These two countries helped us cement our methodology for launching EZBZ in a new country..

6. What structural elements of an innovative tech business, like EZBZ, made it scalable to an international marketplace?

Traditionally, businesses like EZBZ have a very hard time setting up operations in a new country since it involves on-boarding and sales to local businesses, something that must be done by someone local and is usually very expensive. EZBZ's significant advantage is with its technology, which uses artificial intelligence algorithms to understand a user request and match it to all the relevant businesses who can match it. The technology can be adjusted to work in any country in a very short amount of time, allowing EZBZ to launch any country in less than two months.

EZBZ also uses local operators in order to open new countries. To do this, we identify individuals or companies that already have a local structure in place and are positioned in the market to take on local operations of EZBZ. These individuals have necessary connections in different industries that EZBZ has forged successful partnerships with in America such as media, utilities, banking, insurance and real estate. These partners are bringing more ideas and innovation to EZBZ as well as massive international joint ventures, which change the game for the company.

7. What were some of the unexpected obstacles you have encountered while trying to expand EZBZ outside the United States?

The biggest challenges are the physical distance and time differences. In many countries, big business is conducted face-to-face and digital substitutes such as Skype and GoToMeeting are barely tolerated. As for time differences, the Middle East expects many meetings to take place early in the morning and on Sundays, which is a work day for them, and they are only 7 hours away. Comparatively, scheduling with the Far East and Australia, can be an organizational nightmare.

8. What cultural barriers did you encounter when moving your business into international markets? How do you overcome those?

Absolutely. For example in Israel, we faced a cultural technological barrier when working with the Orthodox Community since many of their businesses do not have access to email or SMS. To overcome this, we developed a technology that will send the business owner an actual phone call that will read him the request. If he wants to reply, he just needs to dial back and the call is directed to a call center who will reply for him. Additionally, we need to adjust our marketing collateral for certain countries where modesty is very important and images of women in presentations, videos or movies are usually replaced with men.

For more details on the social concierge service visit: www.myezcz.com •



Shana Schlossberg

