

**RELATIONSHIP MARKETING IN THE
EXPORT SECTOR:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE DUBAI
AND US/CANADA SURVEY RESULTS.**

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Abstract

This comparative analysis attempts to determine if significant differences exist in exporter relationship dimensions between two regions: Dubai and US/Canada. Significant differences are found between pure exporters and hybrid exporters with respect to number of employees and experience exporting. Eight export relationship dimensions are also examined: dependence, trust, understanding, commitment, communication, distance, uncertainty and conflict. No significant differences are found in relationship dimensions in the two regions. This suggests that exporters generally have similar expectations of their trade relationships in these different cultures, and that similar relationship-building behaviors can lead to a successful exporting relationship in both regions.

Introduction

Exporting represents one of the most common means of entering foreign markets. Its advantages over other market entry strategies are based on reduced financial risk, lower commitment of resources and a high degree of flexibility (Stottinger and Schlegelmilch, 1998). Exporting and export behavior have been the focus of a large body of literature (Cavusgil and Nevin, 1981; Douglas and Craig, 1992; Leonidou, 1995a, 1995b, 2002; Leonidou and Katsikeas, 1996; Li and Cavusgil, 1991). This early export marketing literature mainly focused on American, European and Japanese exports. However, the export marketing literature has recently expanded to include other regions of the world such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Vietnam, Australia, Korea, Thailand, and other countries (Eid, 2011; Hammoutene, 2004; Lee and Griffith, 2004; Nguyen and Nguyen, 2010; Ogunmokun and Ng, 2004; Racela, Chaikittisilpa and Thoumrungroje, 2006). This paper compares empirical evidence on eight determinants of successful export marketing relationships and on the role of psychic distance for exporters in two different regions of the world, the United Arab Emirates and North America.

Literature Review

A sound business-to-business relationship can be beneficial to both buyers and sellers, such as importers and exporters. Leonidou et al. (2006) state that sellers can better match their products and services to customer needs; secure high repeat sales and exploit new market opportunities; minimize customer switching to competitors; use their customers as a source of innovative ideas; and gain access to useful market information. Buyers can insure a long-term supply of inputs for their production; make use of the seller's expertise and resources to protect their cost structure; suggest changes in seller's production operations that would speed up processes; reduce wastage and improve efficiency; exploit technical developments and cost rationalization in the seller's organization; and achieve better coordination of their company's functions when dealing with multiple suppliers.

Using content analysis, Agariya and Singh (2011) provide an overview of the existing academic literature on relationship marketing, summarising definitions and major constructs, including sector-specific defining constructs. In the export sector, export marketing relationship research has attempted to identify some determinants of successful exporting relationships. Leonidou et al (2006) review these factors and provide an integrated model of the behavioral dimensions of industrial buyer-seller relationships using empirical evidence in Greece, which confirms findings of previous research on the subject. The authors identify ten major constructs that play a critical role in successful business relationships: distance, trust, understanding, dependence, commitment, communication, conflict, adaptation, cooperation, and satisfaction. These can be briefly described as follows:

Distance: degree of unfamiliarity of one business party with the other;

Trust: belief that the other business party will be honest, fair and reliable;

Understanding: willingness to empathize with the other party's situation and constraints;

Dependence: degree that one party needs the relationship to achieve their goals;

Commitment: the effort put into a working relationship;

Communication: the exchange of meaningful information between two business parties;

Conflict: blocking behavior such as disagreement, tension and frustration;

Adaptation: making adjustments in processes to accommodate the other party;

Cooperation: balanced exchange and mutuality to achieve intra- and inter-firm goals;

Satisfaction: achieving the desired outcome in the relationship.

Several researchers have recently examined the above constructs individually or in combination in a variety of countries. Given the international nature of exporting, it is not surprising that the role of psychic distance has received attention in many studies in many cultural environments (Albaum, 2012; Hammoutene, 2004; La et al., 2005; Lohtia et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2007; Racela et al., 2006; Solberg, 2008). The role of psychic distance cannot be understated, even in exporting relationships between firms from relatively similar cultures, such as Canada and the United States. Because of their geographic proximity and long-standing bilateral trade, Canadian and American marketers have much familiarity and experience trading with each other, and for the necessity to assess whether or not to adapt their marketing strategy, in part or in whole, to the other market (Heroux and Hammoutene, 2012). This includes the development of customer relationships. The individual importing and exporting activities of firms on both sides of the border, and the relationships they have established with their trade partners, are responsible for the staggering aggregate volume of bilateral trade of approximately \$1.6 billion a day in goods and services in 2012, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Other relationship constructs have also been supported by empirical evidence. The importance of trust (Clark et al., 2010; Hammoutene, 2004; Katsideas et al., 2009; Leonidou et al., 2008; Lohtia et al., 2009; Sanzo and Vazquez, 2011; Star-Glass, 2011) has been demonstrated in several studies as an important component of a relationship and as a significant antecedent of commitment (Kuhlmeier and Knight, 2010). Commitment (Ahmed, 2009; Barry et al., 2008; Hammoutene, 2004; Kim et al., 2011; Kuhlmeier and Knight, 2010; Lee et al., 2007; Leonidou et al., 2008) and communication (Hammoutene, 2004; Kuhlmeier and Knight, 2010; Lages et al., 2005, 2009; Sanzo and Vazquez, 2011) in exporting relationships were also supported by empirical evidence, as have cooperation (Hammoutene, 2004; Kuhlmeier and Knight, 2010; Racela et al., 2006; Sanzo and Vazquez, 2011), and satisfaction (Barry et al., 2008; Eid, 2011; Lee et al., 2007; Sanzo and Vazquez, 2011). Kuhlmeier and Knight (2010) examined how relationship constructs support intermediary performance, and find that cooperation and commitment are significant performance antecedents, and that communication drives cooperation, trust and commitment.

So far, the other constructs have appeared less frequently in recent published research, but may be the subject of future research: understanding (Hammoutene, 2004), dependence (Hammoutene, 2004; Racela et al., 2006), conflict (Hammoutene, 2004), and adaptation (Lee and Griffith, 2004). Other possible dimensions influencing the development of successful exporting relationship were also explored in the research, such as uncertainty (Hammoutene, 2004; Solberg, 2008) and customer entertainment (Oakley and Bush, 2012).

Hammoutene's (2004) study on exporter relationship dimensions in the Dubai Jebel Ali free trade zone in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) included eight constructs believed to be determinants of successful relationships with foreign customers: distance, trust, uncertainty, conflict, understanding, commitment, communication and cooperation. The findings suggest that companies engaged in pure exporting are more experienced, employ more people, and exhibit more active behavior toward conducting their foreign business. Such firms sell to a greater number of export markets, deal with more foreign customers, and obtain more foreign orders. The study also finds that pure exporters are distinguished by greater dependence, trust, understanding, commitment, communication, and cooperation, but less distance, uncertainty and conflict between the parties. Subsequent research (Heroux and Hammoutene, 2012), using the same methodology, examined these eight export relationship dimensions from the perspectives of American and Canadian exporting firms. The relationship constructs were found to be similar for seven of the eight dimensions: dependence, understanding, commitment, communication, distance, uncertainty and conflict. This is consistent with the perception that psychic distance between the United States and Canada is small and that both parties would have similar expectations in a trade relationship. However, significant differences were found for the trust construct. Canadian firms tend to attribute greater importance to trust than their American counterparts. Therefore, American exporters should not neglect trust-building activities with Canadian clients.

Research Methodology

Using data from the research in North America (Heroux and Hammoutene, 2012) and UAE (Hammoutene, 2004), the present research attempts to determine if significant differences exist in exporter relationship dimensions between these two regions. Both studies used the same methodology. Structured surveys (e-mail in Dubai and telephone in North America) were conducted with exporting executives in both regions. The exporting companies to be contacted were obtained from business directories in each country and were used as a sampling frame. The survey instrument, developed by Hammoutene (2004), consisted of two sections. The first section of the questionnaire dealt with company demographic questions, including a question on whether the firm is a pure exporter (i.e., involved in import-export activities only) or a hybrid exporter (i.e., involved in export, assembly and/or processing). The second section of the questionnaire included perceptual dimensions which were adapted from the Leonidou et al. (2002) study of U.S. export manufacturers. The exporting executives were asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). The questionnaire included 24 dimensions that are believed to be determinants of successful relationships

with foreign customers. The dimensions were grouped into eight categories: distance, trust, uncertainty, understanding, commitment, communication, conflict and cooperation. The pilot test of the original survey indicated an internal consistency measure of 0.99772 (97.72%) using Cronbach's reliability coefficient alpha, which is satisfactory because it is close to 1 (Hammoutene, 2004).

Sample Characteristics

In the Dubai survey, a total of 250 questionnaires were emailed in March 2003 to Jebel Ali exporters, of which 57 were used in the data analysis with a response rate of 22.8%. Parent companies of the sampled firms came mostly from Europe (35%) and North America (30%). As shown on Table 1, about 58% of the firms employed over 51 full time staff and over 60% of the firms had an annual turnover of at least US\$10 million. The firms selected came from different industry sectors such as: agriculture/food, manufacturing, construction, IT, services, trading and others. Services and trading alone account for 30% followed by manufacturing 21%. In terms of length of operation, almost 50% of firms had been operating in Jebel Ali Free Trade Zone (FTZ) from 10 to 15 years.

Whilst in the US/Canada survey, a total sample of 124 telephone surveys were completed in April 2011, with 62 firms in the United States and 62 firms in Canada. The response rate was 11%, which is not unusual for telephone surveys for business samples (Leonidou et al. 2008), and is more than twice the sample size of the Hammoutene (2004) study. The characteristics of the responding firms are presented in Table 1. Canadian firms employed fewer full-time staff than American firms. Over 75% of Canadian firms had less than 10 full-time employees compared to 44.8% of American firms. Over 25% of American firms had more than 100 employees whereas none of the Canadian firms in our sample had more than 100 employees.

The majority of exporters in both countries had annual sales turnover of less than US\$10 million (69.2% in Canada and 60.0% in the U.S.). In both countries, approximately 50% of the companies had 10–15 years of exporting experience. However, some differences can be found in the other half of the sample: there were more recent startups in Canada, and more years of experience in U.S. firms: over 20% of Canadian firms only had a few years of exporting experience (0–3 years) compared to less than 2% of U.S. firms, while 29% of U.S. firms had 16 or more years of exporting experience compared to less than 2% of Canadian firms. Although the firms in both countries represented a variety of economic activity sectors, there were more agriculture/food exporters and trade exporters in Canada than the U.S., whereas there were more manufacturing exporters, services and other exporters in the U.S. than Canada.

Export Markets

It was found that 54% of the Dubai sampled firms exported to the Middle East and Africa as these markets were traditionally closer markets in terms of geographical location and cultural proximity. This was particularly true for other Gulf Council Countries (i.e. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain), countries such as Lebanon, Syria and Iraq as well as North African countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt). This finding supported the role played by psychic distance in exporting as substantiated by earlier literature review (Cavusgil, 1984; Cavusgil and Nevin, 1981; Dichtel et al., 1984, 1990; Joynt, 1982; Johanson and Vahlne, 1990).

Given that the U.S. and Canada have had a long history as each other's largest trading partner, it was not surprising to find that 66.1% of Canadian firms exported to the U.S. market and 61.3% of American firms exported to the Canadian market. Because of their close geographic proximity, twice as many American firms than Canadian firms exported to Mexico, their other NAFTA partner. One fifth of American and Canadian companies exported to the Caribbean region. A larger percentage of American firms exported to Central/South America, their southern Hispanic neighbors, as well as Europe, the Far East and Indian subcontinent. On the other hand, a larger percentage of Canadian firms exported to the Middle East/Northern Africa, Eastern Africa and other regions of the world. The Canadian connection to Africa may have been related to their affinity with the French language. Similarly to the Dubai study, the U.S./Canada data supported the role of psychic distance in exporting, as reported in the literature (Cavusgil and Nevin, 1981; Dichtel et al., 1984, 1990; Johanson and Vahlne, 1990).

Hypothesis Testing

The common aim of the Dubai and U.S./Canada surveys was to attempt to verify the formulated hypotheses for the 8 relationship constructs for hybrid and pure exporters. The research hypotheses were formulated as follows:

H1: Pure and hybrid exporters depend on foreign customers is the same way.

H2: Pure and hybrid exporters' trust of foreign customers is the same way.

H3: Pure and hybrid exporters' understanding of foreign customers is the same way.

H4: Pure and hybrid exporters are committed to foreign customers is the same way.

H5: Pure and hybrid exporters communicate with foreign customers is the same way.

H6: Pure and hybrid exporters' distance with foreign customers is the same way.

H7: Pure and hybrid exporters' uncertainty with foreign customers is the same way.

H8: Pure and hybrid exporters' conflict with foreign customers is the same way.

In addition to hypotheses testing, t-values of the Dubai and U.S./Canada studies were compared both in terms of exporter profile (number of employees, sales turnover, years exporting, and length of operation) as shown on Table 2 and Graph 1; and in terms of the 8 relationship constructs namely, dependence, trust, understanding, commitment, communication, distance, uncertainty and conflicts, as exhibited on Table 3 and Graph 2 respectively.

Discussion Of Results

Pure and Hybrid Exporter Characteristics.

Approximately half of the sample of each country self-identified as pure exporters (53.2% Canadian and 54.8% American) and half were hybrid exporters, combining other operations such as manufacturing, assembly, and/or processing with exporting activities (46.8% Canadian and 45.2% American). Moreover, significant differences were found between pure and hybrid exporters in the number of full-time employees. Pure exporters tend to have fewer employees than hybrid exporters. Since hybrid exporters combine exporting activities with other operations, this may require a larger staff. This result is not consistent with an earlier study by Hammoutene (2004) that found pure exporters in Dubai to have more employees than hybrid exporters.

Significant differences were also found between pure and hybrid exporters in the number of years of exporting experience. Hybrid exporters have more years of exporting experience than pure exporters in this study. These results also contrast with the Dubai study which found that pure exporters had more years of exporting experience. Also, in contrast with the Dubai study, no significant differences were found between pure and hybrid exporters in their annual sales turnover and number of years the firms have been in operation in Canada and the United States, although the differences in the means for years in operation was in the same direction as the Dubai study.

Relationship constructs

Dependence

Although the difference is not statistically significant, the dependence on foreign customers appears to be slightly higher for pure exporters than hybrid exporters, consistent with the Dubai study. Managers of pure exporting firms believe that overseas buyers (1) help their company achieve their business goals and objectives, (2) promote mutual interest and welfare, and (3) maintain a cooperative relationship that benefits the domestic business.

Trust

Although the difference is not statistically significant, pure exporters tend to place greater emphasis on being frank in dealing with each other, keeping trade secrets concerning their business venture, and in communicating honestly about problems they cause in the working relationship. This is consistent with the Dubai study, and suggests that trust promotes behaviors that have positive outcomes and prevents actions that may have negative repercussions in a business relationship.

Understanding

Pure exporters also tend to emphasize the importance of understanding each other's operations and constraints in establishing a successful relationship to a greater degree than hybrid exporters. Although the results are not statistically significant, the direction of the mean differences supports the Dubai study.

Commitment

It is interesting to note that for the commitment dimension, although the results are not statistically significant, the direction of the mean differences is the opposite of the Dubai study. When compared to pure exporters, hybrid exporters in this study placed greater emphasis on preserving a long-lasting relationship with foreign customers, investing time in learning about their foreign customers and allocating the necessary company resources to develop a good working relationship.

Communication

In the U.S./Canada study, no significant difference was found between hybrid and pure exporters. They are both characterized by clear communication and early discussions of tactical/strategic issues, as well as communicating problems if they should arise. However, in the Dubai study significant differences existed as pure exporters were characterized by clearer, open, and a systematic exchange of information.

Distance

The degree of unfamiliarity with foreign customers does not differ between hybrid and pure exporters in this region, contrary to the Dubai study. Canadian and American exporters are both equally familiar with the organizational culture, values, attitudes and working methods of their foreign customers. This is not surprising since the largest export market for the American firms is to Canada and the largest export market of Canadian firms is to the United States, and the psychic distance between these two cultures is relatively small. In addition, the Canadian style of conducting business is often learned in business schools that use American textbooks or Canadian editions of American textbooks. This would enhance the similarity of working styles in both countries.

Uncertainty and Conflict

The extent of uncertainty and conflict were found to be similar between hybrid and pure exporters in the US and Canada, unlike the findings of the Dubai study. No significant differences were found in their ability to monitor and anticipate how their foreign customers will act in the working relationship. Neither characterizes their relationship with foreign customers to be frustrating due to conflict. Similarly, no significant differences were found between American and Canadian exporters. It may be that the familiarity that American and Canadian firms have with their largest trading partner reduces the extent of uncertainty and conflict in their relationship.

CONCLUSION

This paper compared the main results of the Dubai and U.S./Canada studies published in September 2004 and September 2012 respectively. Significant differences were found between pure and hybrid exporters in the number of employees and experience exporting. Contrary to the Dubai study, pure exporters were found to have fewer employees and fewer years of experience with exporting activities than hybrid exporters. Similarly, significant differences were found between Canadian and American exporters in the number of employees and experience exporting. American firms had more employees and more years of experience exporting than Canadian firms.

This paper also examined the importance of 8 relationship constructs between exporters and their foreign customers with respect to the type of exporter, and between American and Canadian firms. Although no significant differences were found between pure exporters and hybrid exporters in the 8 constructs of successful relationships in this North American study, the direction of the mean differences tend to generally support the results of the earlier Dubai study by Hammoutene (2004).

With respect to the relationship dimensions from the perspectives of American and Canadian managers of exporting firms, the results suggest that their perceptions of the relationship constructs are similar for seven of the eight dimensions: dependence, understanding, commitment, communication, distance, uncertainty and conflict. This is consistent with the perception that psychic distance between the United States and Canada is small and that both parties would have similar expectations in building a trade relationship with each other. However, significant differences between Canadian and American firms were found for the trust construct. Canadian firms tend to attribute greater importance to trust in establishing a successful relationship with foreign customers than their American counterparts. This would suggest that for American exporters to establish a good relationship with their Canadian customers, special attention and effort should be given to trust-building activities, such as frankness in dealings, assurances of confidentiality and admissions of errors, in order to promote a long-term relationship.

Limitations and Future Research

The exploratory nature of both studies coupled with the smallness of firm samples make it difficult to generalize data findings and results. More representative samples from the export sectors in North America (including NAFTA member Mexico) and Dubai (including UAE and other GCC member countries) would provide a better understanding of exporter–importer relationships in such vibrant regions in the world. Thus, expanding this relationship research to other regions of the world such as Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, and other regions, would serve two purposes: it would help validate the 8 relationship constructs and it would help identify cultural differences that must be taken into account when dealing with foreign customers in various parts of the world.

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Table 1: Characteristics of Responding Firms (U.S./Canada + Dubai)

Characteristics	Canada (%)	U.S. (%)	Dubai (%)
Location of responding firm	50	50	100
Pure-type exporter	53.2	54.8	51
Hybrid-type exporter	46.8	45.2	49
Sample size	62	62	57
Number full-time staff			
Less than 10	75.9	44.8	1.75
11-25	5.2	12.1	12.28
26-50	10.3	1.7	28.07
51-100	8.6	15.5	36.84
More than 100	0.0	25.9	21.05
Annual sales turnover			
Less than US\$10 million	69.2	60.0	39.29
US\$10 million-US\$100 million	26.9	28.3	41.07
More than US\$100 million	3.8	11.7	19.64
Economic activity sector			
Agriculture/food	26.7	5.0	7.02
Manufacturing	13.3	26.7	21.05
Construction	5.0	0.0	3.51
Information technology	8.3	1.7	7.02
Services	10.0	26.7	10.53
Trading	31.7	5.0	19.30
Other	5.0	30.0	31.58
Length of operations			
0-3 years	21.7	1.7	12.28
4-9 years	11.7	17.7	38.60
10-15 years	50.0	51.6	49.12
16 or more years	1.6	29.0	--
Export markets			
United States	66.1	—	8.78
Mexico	21.0	41.9	--
Canada	—	61.3	--
Caribbean	21.0	22.6	--
Central/South America	27.4	33.5	--
Europe	33.9	50.0	14.00
Far East	25.8	33.9	10.53
Middle east/Northern Africa	30.6	22.6	54.50
Eastern Africa	19.4	11.3	--
Indian subcontinent	12.9	22.6	--
Other	25.8	14.5	6.99

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Table 2: Two Samples t-test American/Canadian and Dubai (Pure & hybrid) exporters

Dimensions	t-Values		
	American/Canadian	Dubai	Differences
Number of employees	3,07	2,26	0,81
Annual Sales Turnover	1,32	3,19	1,87
Number of Years Exporting	2,34	5,05	2,71
Length of operation	0,74	3,66	2,92

Graph 1: t-test American/Canadian vs. Dubai (Pure and Hybrid) exporters

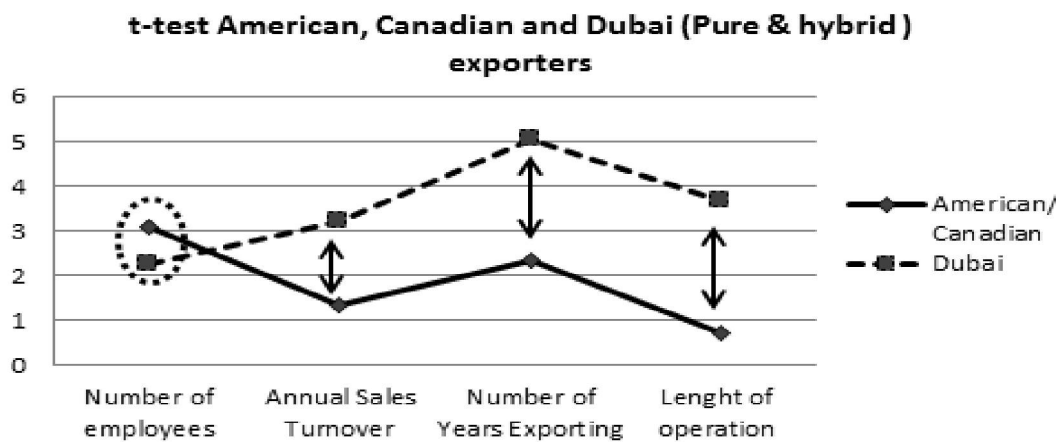


Table 3: Relationship Constructs Pure vs. Hybrid types

Constructs	t-values		
	American/Canadian	Dubai	Differences
Dependence	1,36	9,54	8,18
Trust	0,12	2,23	2,11
Understanding	1,71	2,21	0,50
Commitment	1,05	7,99	6,94
Communication	0,03	1,85	1,82
Distance	0,15	1,94	1,78
Uncertainty	1,56	3,47	1,91
Conflicts	1,11	8,79	7,69

Graph 2: Differences between Relationship Constructs Pure vs. Hybrid Types

