The International Expansion Playbook

A framework for founders scaling B2B SaaS from emerging into developed markets, without burning twelve months of runway.

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01 · WHY THIS EXISTS

Most founders lose the first year.

Not because they are not good operators. Because the default playbook they are handed is built for companies with $50M in the bank and a brand that already carries weight in the target market.

Hire a VP Sales in London. Run some cold outbound. Book flights to trade shows.

If you are scaling from an emerging market into a developed one, that playbook does not just underperform. It actively sets you back.

> You do not have brand recognition. You do not have local case studies. You do not have warm intros. **The default playbook assumes you already have trust in that market. You do not.**

What is in scope here is the logic: the order of operations, the sequencing criteria, the hire-or-do-not decisions, and the five conditions under which this whole approach breaks down.

Your trust equity abroad is zero.

In your home market you have spent years accumulating trust. References, case studies, press, conference appearances, a following, a reputation. Every sales conversation starts from a baseline of "we have heard of you".

Land in a new market and that trust equity is zero. Not low. **Zero.**

Your website is the first thing prospects see and they have never heard of you. Your LinkedIn is in the wrong language. You have no customers they recognise and nobody in their network who can vouch for you.

Cold outbound into that vacuum produces 1 to 2% reply rates, and founders conclude that outbound does not work internationally. That is not what is happening.

> You cannot scale outbound in a new market without **building trust in parallel**. The two are not sequential. They are simultaneous.

Sequence your markets before you touch one.

The second biggest mistake: founders go straight for the hardest market first. Almost always the UK, the US or Germany. The most prestigious, and not coincidentally the most competitive, most expensive and slowest to close.

#	CRITERION	WHAT YOU ARE ACTUALLY ASKING
1	**Development stage of the buyer market**	Mature markets mean slower cycles, more stakeholders, more procurement friction
2	**Competitive density**	Are you option 2 or option 20? The same deal is far easier to win as option 2
3	**Cultural and operational proximity**	How do buyers here build trust, and does your home motion translate?
4	**Cost to learn**	A failed deal costs weeks in one market and months in another. Make mistakes where tuition is cheap
5	**Strategic optionality**	Launching pads give you logos that unlock harder markets. Endpoints do not travel

The instinct to start with the prestigious market is the instinct to **fail expensively**. The hard market will still be there when you show up with ammunition.

Two workstreams.
Only two.

ENGINE 1

Outbound that tests message-market fit

Always-on pipeline work. Its most important job early is not revenue, it is signal: which pain points resonate here, which angles get replies, which ICP variants convert. You are running outbound to learn how to sell in this market. Deals are a lagging indicator.

ENGINE 2

Trust-building that compounds

One, and only one, strategic build per month. A case study. A review site presence. A founder profile that actually posts. A webinar. A localised landing page. Not five. One, finished, in market.

WHY ONE AND NOT FIVE

Founders who build everything at once finish nothing

The case study is 70% done, the website is stuck in review, the newsletter launched once and died. None of them compound because none of them ship.

Outbound without trust-building is a treadmill. Trust-building without outbound is vanity. **The dual engine is how you escape both.**

The founder sells the first 10 deals.

The default move is to hire a Head of Market for six figures plus commission plus equity. They land, get no support, struggle for traction, and six to twelve months later either leave or are let go. The company is £200K down with no pipeline and no playbook.

The alternative, which almost nobody does:

WHY THE FOUNDER	WHAT IT PRODUCES
Highest trust currency	"Founder wants 20 minutes" outperforms "SDR wants to demo" by an order of magnitude
Real-time decision authority	Pricing, packaging and positioning calls happen on the call. A hire cannot make them
Genuine discovery	A hire assumes the company already knows. The founder surfaces what nobody knew
Produces the artefacts	Recorded calls, first case studies, objection library, the proof the motion works

You are not founder-selling forever. You are founder-selling until the motion is documented and repeatable. Usually **6 to 10 deals**. Then you hire, and not a VP Sales first.

Do the maths before you do anything else.

Before you hire, before you build content, before you book flights, before you spin up outbound: start with the revenue target. Not the aspiration. What has to happen in this market this year for the expansion to count as working?

Then work backwards. Revenue implies deals closed, which implies proposals, which implies qualified meetings, which implies positive replies, which implies total outreach volume. Each step has a conversion rate.

Almost every time I do this with a founder, one of two things happens.

Their plan cannot possibly produce their target

A part-time VA and an intern, planning on significant new revenue, and the maths says 300+ net-new contacts a month for twelve months. The plan and the target do not reconcile. Something has to give.

They have no idea what their conversion rates are

Because they have never measured them. So there is no way to know whether the plan is realistic, and no way to know which step to fix when it is not working.

Both outcomes are useful. Both are painful. Both beat learning it six months later.

Every month outbound runs.
Every month one build ships.

PHASE	MONTH	THE COMPOUNDING BUILD
Foundation	1	CRM live, LinkedIn profiles, ICP definition, email warming. Very few meetings, and that is the point
Test fit	2	Multi-touch. LinkedIn primary, email layered in as retargeting
Compound	3	First thought leadership piece in the publication your buyers read
Compound	4	Review site and directory presence. Every prospect Googles you
Compound	5	First webinar, hosted by the founder, on a topic buyers care about
Compound	6	Website refresh and localised landing pages, informed by real data
Efficiency	7+	Paid trial with kill criteria, SEO foundations, nurture, events

What does not get built in year one: a VP Sales. A full marketing team. A rebrand. A partner programme with 50 partners. An events calendar with eight conferences.

The skim-friendly version.

Do

- Sequence markets by difficulty, not prestige. Easiest to win first
- Run outbound and trust-building in parallel from week one
- Have the founder sell the first 10 deals personally, then transfer
- Ship one compounding asset per month and finish it before starting the next
- Work backwards from revenue target to weekly activity, with honest assumptions
- Warm email infrastructure for 4 to 6 weeks before sending anything cold

Do not

- Start in the UK, US or Germany as your first international market
- Hire a Head of Market before the motion is documented and repeatable
- Send cold outbound into a vacuum with no presence, no content, no reviews
- Run five strategic initiatives at once and finish none of them
- Assume your home market's sales motion translates unchanged. It will not
- Confuse activity with progress. 500 messages at 1% is a failed experiment

Five times this framework is the wrong answer.

I want to be honest about when not to use this. The worst thing I could do is pretend it is universal.

You are pre product-market fit

If your home market is not producing repeatable revenue, expansion is not the answer. You are running from a problem that will follow you.

You are under £1M ARR and bootstrapped

The maths does not support the investment. You need more home revenue or external funding first.

The founder will not show up

This requires the founder to be the face of the brand: posting, hosting, selling. If that is not going to happen, use a different operating model.

You already hired a full international team

Then you do not need a playbook, you need management and accountability. Different problem.

Your ACV is below £10K

The unit economics assume deals big enough to justify the work.
Below that you need product-led or self-serve.

It is a hard road.
It is doable.

If you are thinking about international scale and want to pressure-test your plan, not a sales call, a sanity check.

The 30-minute GTM diagnostic. We walk through the sequencing, the maths, the current state of your trust infrastructure and the hire-or-transfer question. I will tell you honestly where the gaps are.

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