

SIE Project Internationalisation Good Practice from Kent SEED Project Virtual Trade Missions

Background:

Kent International Business (KIB) is an 'umbrella programme' which brings together various support services and initiatives which aim to help local SMEs with internationalisation. Through the KIB programme, Kent County Council runs various business support programmes to help SMEs with internationalisation including activities as part of various Interreg projects.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit in 2022, two main things which were part of these international trade support programmes had to stop immediately: **international travel** and **large gatherings**. After a brief pause in activities to allow businesses to adapt to the immediate economic shock and change in circumstances brought about by the pandemic, Kent County Council and its partners from the South-East of England had to adapt planned programmes of export development activities very quickly. The most significant shift was from 'real life' to online.

Summary:

The [SEED \(South-East Export Development\) Project](#), funded by the [South East Local Enterprise Partnership \(SELEP\)](#) was an opportunity to develop and run a series of **Virtual Trade Missions**. As companies started to recover from the immediate impacts of the pandemic, they were invited to join a series of Virtual Trade Missions with the aim of gaining market insight and connecting virtually to 'in-market' contacts relevant to their sector such as distributors, retailers or healthcare providers.

Activities:

First, target sectors were chosen (Life Sciences, Food & Drink and Digital & Creative) and then a range of international markets were selected based on intelligence from the Department for International Trade's business advisors. Kent County Council then made use of its international connection and that of its local stakeholder network (Chamber of Commerce, Department for International Trade) to identify (paid) 'in-market' expertise to help deliver the virtual missions. Programmes of activities were then agreed and typically followed the same format:

1. Sector-focused Market insight report to outline opportunities and key factors to bear in mind for the target market
2. Company recruitment to invite companies to sign up for the programme
3. An online market briefing webinar session
4. Completing a company brochure and [sector videos](#) to send to in-market contacts
5. (Shipping product samples to in-market contacts – in the case of [ambient] food and drink products)
6. 1-2-1 virtual meetings with the in-market experts to support the SMEs' export-readiness and establish target contacts
7. A virtual trade mission where companies had online 1-2-1 meetings with in-market business contacts



Management & Governance:

KIB is managed by Kent County Council and a local steering group which meets around 4 times per year. There is a smaller group of partners which provide direct support services to companies which form the core steering group, and a wider range of additional partners who meet from time to time and who can assist with disseminating information.

Results & Impacts:

The KIB partners helped to measure the results of the project by capturing the following information:

- Leads generated and contacts made by SMEs (measurable during the life of the project)
- (New) International sales by SMEs - longer term evidence of success
- International collaborations, agreements and partnerships - longer term evidence of success

Financing:

Unlike physical trade missions, the costs of running a virtual mission were relatively modest and the choice of international markets was not limited by geographical proximity. Virtual missions also proved to be very efficient from a time perspective and were a good way to explore possibilities in a potential market without large financial commitments or risks.

Unlike physical trade missions which involve significant time and costs (travel, accommodation etc.), virtual missions can be run at a modest cost with the main expenditure needed to cover the costs of any in-market expertise (lead generation, consultations with companies and market insight reports). The typical cost of a virtual mission through the SEED project (for 10 SMEs) was around €10,000.

Transferability:

The model for each virtual mission was refined as the SEED project developed. Any export support organisation could follow the steps above to run a sector-focused, market specific virtual trade mission programme

Challenges Encountered:

Finding the right 'in-market' partners – many organisations approached either didn't have the capacity to support the project or couldn't meet the requirements of the brief for the available budget.

The further on we moved from the worst of the pandemic, the greater the appetite of businesses to return to real life events (particularly for the food and drink sector, where tasting and experiencing a product is an extremely important part of the export process).

www.kentinternationalbusiness.co.uk/SEED/

