

ROLE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY FOR INTERNATIONAL MARKETING AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL APPROACH

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Abstract: Among the numerous technological developments of the 21st century in this age of globalization and the one that seems to have remarkably revolutionized and transformed the manager's agenda is that of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Telecommunication has made countries borderless and distance non relevant. Through ICT, opportunities have been created for both small and large businesses alike. Competition through trade has therefore increased as products and customers have become global. At the same time countries, companies and people have become interdependent on each other by forming networks and strategic alliances. The concept of afrotrading.com and its accompanying afrotrading.net has been created to serve as both a theoretical and practical instrument. The Afro Trading online platform supports entrepreneurs to conveniently and efficiently explore and identify business opportunities worldwide and as an educational tool is used to train and expose students to experience the realities of global business and entrepreneurship, while the originators continue to improve and update the concept through research.

Key words: International Marketing, Entrepreneurship, AfroTrading, Information Technology,

Introduction

AfroTrading is an emerging company that has a global perspective with great potential for growth and expansion. Our main market objective is to develop and execute a marketing strategy that would help to build membership of businesses, owners and professionals around the globe and subsequently generate revenue. The world is fast changing, moving at an alarming pace toward a global economy, which is facilitated by the advent of the internet. Electronic commerce over the Internet is globally affecting trade and finance, opening new markets and changing the ways we do business.

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Information Technology (IT) has transformed companies profitably. Herman Miller and Bose (Hill, 2009a) are typical examples. According to forecasters and analysts, e-commerce accounts for more than \$102 billion of the world's economy. This figure is expected to be on the rising side for years to come as new markets emerge in Africa and other developing regions. Internet has become very indispensable and cost effective for communications, commerce and education. It will continue to facilitate professional growth and expansion of the private sector, encouraging formation of new businesses and international trades. The number of Internet users, especially among the professional and business community has been growing worldwide over the past decades. Most businesses are now relying on the Internet for research, communications, marketing and promotion of their businesses, while professionals are improving their knowledge and skills through online resources. According to a recent research, there will be billions of new Internet users worldwide within the next decade and millions of business establishing online presence. Africa and other developing regions are embracing Internet technology with rapid growth of Internet access and users; a trend expected to continue with time. According to Moore's Law this trend alongside with computer power is expected to change and double after every 18 months.

Over the past ten years, millions of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have been created around the globe (Burca et al., 2004). This is mainly as a result of local and international policies that have facilitated the liberalization of private sector. Some of the dramatic events are de centralization of economies such as in China and Eastern Europe; Formation of regional economies such as European Union, NAFTA (Cateora et al., 2009; Hill, 2009b).

The marketing relationships between the developed and the developing countries have been at government level, strictly controlled by international marketing and government institutions. However, recently, the developed Countries have realized that their economic policies and strategies for Africa did not yield the desired results. Therefore, Countries like America, UK and especially China, are redirecting their efforts in developing and building the private sectors in Africa and other developing nations (Ebony magazine, 2008).

Due to massive emigration from the lesser-developed nations, there are now millions of people as Africans in Diaspora living in different

parts of the world, mostly in the advanced countries. Many of these are professionals and experts in various industries, controlling reasonable amount of wealth. African immigrant communities in United States are now changing their status from student/working communities to business. Majority of the immigrants are embracing America as their home and taking advantage of the economic opportunities in America by investing and establishing their own businesses.

It is now evident that: With the increasing number of internet users worldwide, the growing trend of international marketing, the globalization of economies and the emergence of new markets, the opportunities for small businesses and professionals to network, trade and explore new markets on a worldwide basis are unlimited (Scarborough et al., 2009). After analyzing these evolutionary trends, Mr. Israel Chidi Agwamba started developing the concept of AfroTrading Online Platforms in the year 2006.

AfroTrading is an emerging company that provides online networking and marketing platforms for businesses and professionals to explore global opportunities expand market base and maximize their potentials. It will also serve as a resource center for scholars, students and entrepreneurs to exchange and share ideas for profitable opportunities. The AfroTrading platforms have been uniquely designed to collect and store professional and/or business data that is provided by its users. The collected and stored data is then used to offer its users a variety of opportunities and options that will allow them to make appropriate decisions to achieve success.

Backed by input from IT and business experts, the following online platforms are now available:

- 1) AfroTrading.com; a marketing platform designed to profile and connect small and medium sized businesses as well as prospective entrepreneurs all around the world.
- 2) AfroTrading.net, a networking and marketing platform designed for marketing professionals' scholars and experts all around the world to connect share information and market products and services.

As a web based company, it is expected to experience an exponential growth with the increasing number of global Internet users and evolution of information technology. This is especially so as not many businesspersons in underdeveloped or poor countries can afford to travel to countries to explore marketing opportunities

and make contacts. Substantial amount of fund will be devoted annually to market the site through different and well-tested strategies.

Methodology

The methodology for this study is eclectic and uses an interdisciplinary systems approach. We reviewed concepts and theories from related areas of management, marketing, economics, international marketing and information communication technology to create the concept of the global business platform. By a taking a systems view, the combination of theories and concepts produced the model that materialized into AfroTrading.com/net. Part of our search examined information from periodicals, trade and association materials, journals and web-based surfing. We bench marked with other models to create our own peculiar niche for international marketing, entrepreneurship and as a tool for learning. To avoid being biased or inclined towards following any particular country's standards for trade or business we created an environment that is flexible and open in approach for meeting multi country needs in terms of politics, economics, legal and socio-cultural environments. It is also a learning environment, where participants from different countries can learn from each other, exchange ideas, negotiate and accept offers when a mutual zone of agreement is reached. While applying the marketing principle of promotion to introduce AfroTrading as an information technology (IT) product this paper seeks to describe together with the other 2Ps of marketing (place and price), the nature and facts about the concept of AfroTrading.com/net. How it came about, its purpose and future prospects.

Goal for North America and other developed regions

We adopted a geographic segmentation approach to divide the markets into different geographic units (Kotler and Armstrong, 2009). As a US based company, AfroTrading connects business owners in North American and other developed regions to the rising business opportunities in the lesser-developed world, especially in Africa as result of globalization of economies. This allows American businesspersons to gather enough information that they could analyze before venturing into unknown territories where there is not only the potential for business but also reports of risk and other uncertainties.

The company provides members with specific business data, profiles, benefits and risk factors in a given country based on political, economic, philosophical, legal and cultural environments of that country. This tool helps companies make informed decisions regarding investments or partnership relationships across borders in the given country of their choice for business (Johansson, 2009; Cateora et al., 2009; Deresky, 2008).

The mission of afro trading

The mission of AfroTrading is to enable small and medium sized businesses as well as prospective and emerging entrepreneurs based upon researched information and via exchange of ideas learn and explore world market opportunities by finding new customers while maximizing their business capabilities and revenue by leveraging the Internet under a secure environment. The afro trading platforms offer the following benefits to users:

Increase in sales and bottom line.

- Very low sourcing cost.
- Maximizing Exposure of products with a low budget.
- Building loyal customers.
- Locating reliable suppliers or buyers.
- Communicating directly with decision makers.
- Eliminating or minimizing the cost of setting up international operations market.
- Obtaining a reliable and verifiable business data and information.
- Analyzing potential customers in international markets before developing business relationships.
- Keep business growing and expanding beyond the local shores.
- Create avenue for networking.
- Forming strategic alliances.

At afro trading platforms, users can:

- Profile their companies or professional backgrounds.
- Build product catalog and storefront.
- Communicate with business executives worldwide and other members.
- Post trade leads and ADS.
- Monitor business inquiries.
- Network with other businesses and professionals.
- Access to the AfroTrading Business Intelligence and more.

Market research

Research makes possible the ability for creativity and innovation (Allen, 2007) of ideas that adds value to the overall worth of the organization (McDaniel and Rogers, 2010; Kumar, 2000; Cooper and Schindler, 2008). Since the idea of AfroTrading was initiated about couple of years ago, we have been conducting low-level research by using the following different methods:

- Interviewing potential customers, trade organizations and associations and government agencies.
- Developing questionnaires, which are distributed to potential customers and registered members.
- Developing and conducting online poll questions.
- Fact-findings from publications, research works, international establishments, as well as monetary and economic development institutions.

As we continue to grow, we will continue to conduct more research, which sometimes may involve other related parties such as institutions and organizations. To this end, AfroTrading will be seeking to develop relationship with academic institutions, chambers of commerce and trade organizations in various countries for the purposes of research, development and support.

Statistics of internet usage

The advent of Internet has changed the way we communicate, interact and do business. Below are some statistics of Internet usage internationally. (Figures 1- 3)

Internet Usage Internationally and Population Statistics

World Regions	Population (2008 Est.)	Internet Users Dec/31, 2000	Internet Usage, Latest Data	% Population (Penetration)	Usage % of World	Usage Growth 2000-2008
Africa	955,206,348	4,514,400	51,065,630	5.3%	3.5%	1,031.2%
Asia	3,776,181,949	114,304,000	578,538,257	15.3%	39.5%	406.1%
Europe	800,401,065	105,095,093	384,633,765	48.1%	26.3%	266.0%
Middle East	197,090,443	3,284,800	41,939,260	21.3%	2.9%	1,176.8%
North America	337,167,246	108,095,800	248,241,969	73.6%	17.0%	129.6%
Latin America	576,091,673	18,068,919	139,009,209	24.1%	9.5%	669.3%
Oceania	33,981,562	7,620,480	20,204,331	59.5%	1.4%	165.1%
WORLD TOTAL	6,676,120,288	360,985,492	1,463,632,361	21.9%	100.0%	305.5%

Figure 1: World internet users and population stats

There is cultural and economic diversity from region to region as a result of the history of the continent. However, our main focus is on

professionals and business owners and how they could effectively participate and compete in the global marketplace (Hill, 2009a). Our target audience also includes the existing small and medium size companies worldwide, especially in lesser and developing countries and the future potential new businesses, which are now in the formation stage (Burca et al., 2004). These may include manufacturers, distributors, suppliers, brokers, wholesalers, retailers, liquidators, purchasing agents, service providers, especially those that are interested in export and import or developing strategic relationships and foreign markets for their products and services. Typically, the small businesses we are targeting have less than 100 employees and less than \$10 million in gross revenue per annum.

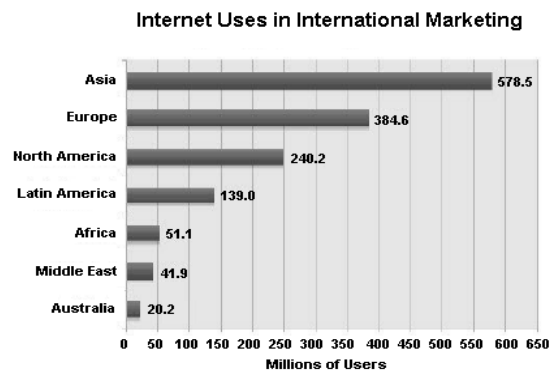


Figure 2: Internet Users Internationally.

Source: Internet World Stats- www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm.
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According to our findings, these categories of businesses may lack the resources, manpower and capital for:

1. Marketing and advertising.
2. Sales Personnel.
3. Outsourcing.
4. Traveling.
5. Storage facility.
6. Maintaining offices.

Therefore, they are likely to consider other alternatives by using cost effective or efficient means of achieving these goals.

The market: Market share and target audience

E-commerce accounts for majority of the world economy generating billions of dollars annually, especially in the G8 and other developed nations of the G20 composition. According to recent research, there will be billions of new Internet users worldwide within the next decade and millions of business establishing online presence. With good management and effective marketing strategies, AfroTrading is expected to control at least 0.001% of the market share within this period.

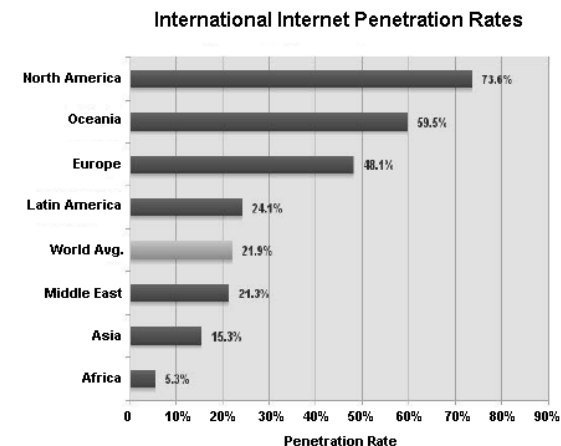


Figure 3: International Internet Penetration Rates.

Source: Internet World Stats- www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm.
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Because of the global nature of AfroTrading, the characteristics and need of customers may vary from region to region and country to country. Therefore, in order to characterize and analyze the size of our target audiences, we have specifically categorized the markets into the following geographic regions (Kotler, 2009):

- i. North America
- ii. South America
- iii. Europe
- iv. Asia
- v. Africa.

The characteristics and need of our customers and the market size may vary from region to region due to disparity in economic development and standards in different region. What is considered a small business or medium sized business in one region (e.g. in the USA the SBA definition of small business is having up to 500 employees) (Kuratko, 2009) may be a considered a large company in another region (e.g. Africa). This is why we approach every region differently, especially in our marketing messages, strategies and pricing.

North America

In the United States alone, there are more than 10 million small and medium sized enterprises and in Canada, more than 5 million. These are the 2 major economies of North America that form the NAFTA bloc together with Mexico. In other North American countries, there could be more than 5 million small and medium sized companies combined. Customers in North America are most organized, better funded and likely to grow and expand their business in foreign countries. They are also most likely to benefit and afford the cost of our services. From Figures 1 and 2 above the North American region has among the highest number of Internet users who could form the bulk of revenue generating base if we can penetrate that market successfully.

South America

In South American countries, most of the companies may fall within the range of our target audience. However, the market size of customers in this region is relatively small because of the economic structure in most of the countries. We are seeking to tap into 200 to 300 thousand companies in the region. The current trend of trade liberations between North and South America, which stimulate the growth and expansion of the private sector, may boost our market size in South America e.g. Brazil which is fast growing economy.

Asia

Asia is another huge market for our business, where the economy is growing rapidly with constant establishment of new enterprises and expansion of existing businesses. In countries like India, China (two of the BRIC countries), South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam are millions of small and medium sized businesses to tap into. The companies in this region especially the Chinese are very active in manufacturing and seeking for expansion in foreign

countries. Most customers in this region are likely to subscribe to and afford the cost of our services.

Europe

The collapse of communism in the Eastern Europe, the establishment of European Union and with most countries becoming free markets and pro western with Russia as one of the BRIC countries, Europe has become a favorable environment for the establishment and growth of small enterprises. There are now millions of small and medium sized companies in Europe, most of them in countries like United Kingdom, Germany and France. As other countries continue to join or solidify their existence in the European Union, the market for our business will continue to grow.

Africa

Africa is a region of major focus for our business. For many decades, the western world and world organizations have been channeling billions of dollars in form of aid through the governments in Africa for economic development. However, the funds did not achieve its desired goal of economic stability because of misappropriation, poor management, corruption and political instability. Small businesses, which are normally the bedrock of any economy are not in existence or under developed.

The Advanced countries appear to be redefining their economic policies in Africa by focusing on the development of small businesses, dealing directly with individual entrepreneurs. Identifying such entrepreneurs may pose a daunting task. This is where the uniqueness and value of Afrotrading.com comes into play. With the AfroTrading Business Intelligence, we provide a verifiable business/company directory of data and information that would be useful for investors or financiers to make decision as regards to investment, funding, or partnership relationship in Africa.

We believe this may accelerate the development of small businesses in Africa, thereby expanding our market base. Currently, there are very few organized small business enterprises in Africa. Most of the businesses are informal and at the level of buying and selling at local markets, streets and public places. There are very few manufacturing activities, but more of importation and trading activities since most of the nations are consuming markets.

Except for multinational and government owned companies, every other business on the African continent is our potential customer.

However, very few may be able to afford to pay for our services although we have very reasonable charges. AfroTrading will continue to explore the markets in other developing regions of the globe offering the same values for the development of small businesses. From figures 1 - 3 above we notice the relatively small number of Internet users as compared to other countries of the world, but Africa has a great potential considering its population and size. Africa as a region is also very heterogeneous comprising of a diverse group of cultures, religions, governmental systems, political background and colonial heritage.

The Middle East

The Middle East is a volatile region. However, in some countries like Israel, Turkey, Egypt and others there are several thousands of small businesses, which are involved in manufacturing and export and import and would find AfroTrading.com very valuable. The political instability in the Mid-east region creates opportunities for AfroTrading as it provides its users to be able to safely conduct business from a distance even in chaotic environmental conditions. Generally, with the increasing number of Internet users, business over e-commerce and globalizing of trades, AfroTrading is tapping into a multibillion-dollar industry. The challenge now is how to penetrate into the market.

Market place trends

Looking at the future how would the changes in the global economy or affairs impact our marketing? AfroTrading is business being positioned to take advantage of evolutionary trends in the international market in years to come. The following marketplace trends would continue to have positive impact on AfroTrading creating more business opportunities and expanding the market size and shares over the past ten years, millions of small business entities have been created around the globe. This is mainly as a result of local and international policies that have facilitated the liberalization of the private sector (Waddock, 2009). Some of the dramatic events over the past decades are:

- I. Decentralization of economies such as in China and Eastern Europe
- II. Formation of regional economies such as EU, NAFTA, MERCUSOR, FTAA, APEC, ASEAN, ECOWAS, COMESAC etc.

As this trend continues, more businesses will be created increasing the market base of AfroTrading.

- I. The number of Internet users, especially among the business community has been growing worldwide over the past decades. Most

businesses are now relying on the Internet for business research, communications, marketing and promotion of their businesses. According to a recent research (reference: InternetWorldStats.com), there will be billions of new Internet users worldwide within the next decade and millions of businesses establishing online presence. Africa and other developing regions are embracing Internet technology with rapid growth of Internet access and users. This trend will continue in years to come.

- II. The trade relationship between the advanced nations and the developing countries has been at government level, strictly controlled by trade policies and government institutions. However, recently, the developed countries have realized that their economic policies and strategies for Africa did not yield the desired results.

Therefore, countries like the USA through programs like the AGOA, the EU and China, are redirecting their efforts in developing and building the private sectors in Africa and other developing nations. This is a very favorable trend for AfroTrading, as the market share and relevance will continue to grow.

Market competition

Since the early nineties, millions of Internet based businesses have been created and more are being launched daily worldwide. However, very few of them have stood the test of time to emerge and remain successful and dominate in the global market. The secret of our success we believe will depend on continuous research and proactively monitoring ongoing trends in the age of globalization and information technology development (Jones and George, 2009; McDaniel and Rogers, 2010).

Millions of such businesses have gone under or failed due to competition, paucity of resources, lack of good business strategies or limited patronage. Again, part of what could explain for this less than expected performance is lack of research. This is why at Afrotrading we want to continuously emphasis and embark on constant research activities in order to sustain our standards and quality.

Because of the universal nature of the Internet and the unlimited business opportunities it offers, millions of Web based business will be created in years to come increasing the competitive nature of the market. In order to prepare for any un-sudden changes or surprises that might occur our strategy is to proactively forecast and experiment with ideas and alternative options as much as is possible.

As a new venture, AfroTrading would naturally be exposed to and could face the following challenges (disadvantages):

Competition.

Limited financial and human resources.

Credibility.

However, our success will depend on our strategies, research, market niche and uniqueness of our services. As a Business-to-Business platform the competition we have to overcome now and in the future are from:

Search engines.

B2B platforms.

Auctions and shopping sites.

Search engines

The major and popular search engines are Google, Yahoo and Alexa. These are companies that have been in the business for over a period of time with proven track of success. They control major shares of Internet business worldwide. As profitable and public traded companies, they are well funded to embark on any level of product innovations and market campaign anywhere in the world. However, because of our size we have the advantage of having closer customer contact, of targeting specialized areas of need that other larger companies may not be willing to serve due to efficiency and cost advantages. We intend to also serve customer demands and facilitate areas where they need help in handling their businesses more effectively.

Our current and potential customers use search engines to research countries, resources, companies, products and other relevant information. These are also some of the services we are offering. In order for us to reach and attract the same customers in the market place, AfroTrading is positioning and differentiating its services from other search engines by the followings methods.

Search Results

When searching for companies, services or products of particular interest on the search engine, the result returns millions of listings even when the keywords are typed. Experience has shown that it is practically impossible to browse through all the listings. At afro trading sites, customers do not have to browse through thousands of listings to find what they are looking for. Unlike the search engines,

customers could specifically find the products or companies they are looking for by industry category or location more easily. Therefore Afro trading sites saves customers a lot of time by narrowing down their choices from search lists and filtering information for specific need, most importantly, focusing on particular niche (Hisrich, 2004). Our aim is to satisfy each and every customer's needs by meeting them properly.

Trade leads

Unlike search engines, customers may post trade lead or find attractive offers for products or services of interest on AfroTrading.com. Search engines collect general information about company or products, which do not reflect any special offers or trade leads.

Direct communication with decision makers For critical business decisions, it is imperative to reach and communicate directly with the decision makers. This is a distinctive value of AfroTrading sites to business owners. It reduces the time and chains of communication ladder to reach decision makers. As a membership oriented service, it is business owners or decision makers that register their companies on AfroTrading sites providing

the contact information of the registrant. Member companies may communicate among each other with our internal communication and networking system. Contrarily, on search engines, companies' websites feature the contact information of the lower cadre of the corporate structures thereby making it more difficult to reach the decision makers when needed.

Email spam

At Afro trading sites, customers receive only targeted email for specific need of the customer. This reduces the amount of unwanted or unsubscribed email customers receive. Email addresses may be extracted from search engine, while personal information on afrotrading.com is secure.

B2B platform

One the most successful B2B platform similar to AfroTrading is Alibaba.com. This is a company founded and based in China. Alibaba has revolutionized how businesses all over the world interact with each other and is very popular. Over the past years Alibaba has transformed into a multimillion-dollar operation with enormous resources to dominate the market for a long time to come.

Most of the potential customers of Afro trading are already registered with Alibaba. It is certain that they enjoy the benefits of the sophisticated services as regards to how they buy, sell or market their services worldwide, as well as having access to the extensive database of companies. These are some of the services we intend to offer to our customers, in which AfroTrading may find it extremely difficult to compete. However, AfroTrading is focusing on a market niche in response to the future global trend and evolution in global business relationships.

AfroTrading is being positioned as the pioneer B2B platform for the under developed and untapped market of Africa, other developing regions and minority businesses in the western world. Our marketing strategy will focus on reaching out to this market audience around the globe and presenting AfroTrading as a brand and unique platform designed for them.

In contrast to Alibaba, AfroTrading, aims at facilitating business and market intelligence of businesses in lesser developed countries particularly Africa for foreign investors and for African businesses overseas in order to establish a viable partnership relationship. AfroTrading will also offer consulting and value-added services to benefit the market niche and deliver effective projects (Wickham and Wickham, 2008; Fombrun and Nevins, 2004). In addition, AfroTrading also offers educational resources in global business, entrepreneurship and related areas that students could use as part of their training to experience and practice doing business in other countries.

Auctions and shopping sites

Our potential customers may use auction and shopping sites such as eBay, overstock and others for buying or selling their products. While these sites are very popular with multimillion dollars operation, AfroTrading differs from these sites by offering potential customers more than the opportunities to buy or sell their products and services. At AfroTrading Sites, customers browse for companies worldwide, develop and build long-term strategic relationships, communicate and exchange information directly with business executives and enjoy variety of offers. AfroTrading is specially designed for international trades and education through expert advice and consulting and not just for buying and selling.

Marketing mix

Within our market niche are inclusive of business entities, trade organizations and chambers of commerce. There are still specific target audience such as purchasing agents, sale agents, trade shows and fairs, advertising agents etc. Therefore, depending on the specific target audience, AfroTrading may be packaged and marketed as any of the following:

As a selling tool: AfroTrading online platform features tools and network sellers need for selling products and services to thousands of companies and customers online. Users may make offers to sell and promote their merchandise to entire member network. Members can search and browse through the offers by product category, location and keywords and respond to the offer with the online communication tool. We are motivated as well as encouraged and intend to apply what Brian Tracy (1995) in his book advanced selling strategies described as, the 'winning edge concept'. This concept states that "small differences in ability can translate into enormous differences in results". What this statement also means is that, if you become just a little bit better in certain critical areas of selling, this slight improvement can translate into a substantial increase in your sales results.

As a buying tool: AfroTrading provides a convenient and automated environment and means that buyers need to buy any product or service directly from suppliers and manufacturers worldwide. It is a place to find the information you need to research, locate and purchase products specific to your needs.

When you place an offer to buy, suppliers will have access to your offer and respond to you. You can communicate directly with suppliers, request for information or request for quotations. All these you do under a private and secure environment.

As a marketing tool: Find new customers and qualify sales leads fast and easy. A constantly updated database of our fast growing members helps you search, sort and select list of targeted leads. Members can conduct direct marketing campaigns by sending a personalized sales letter and a brochure by mail/post to each company on the list. Sending email messages with confidence because email addresses are opted calling or faxing to each company on the list.

As a networking tool: As an electronic trading marketplace, AfroTrading has made the world a small business community so that

you can communicate and network with other businesses around the globe without having to travel to faraway places and incur huge travel expenses and avoid the risk of doing business in unfamiliar territories or spots of turmoil.

As an international chamber of commerce: Due to the economic down turn of Africa and other lesser-developed countries (LDCs), there has been a mass exodus of citizens through what is commonly referred to as the “brain drain” to the developed world over the past decades. Many people of African origin are now well established in most of the Western and other Asian countries, owning and managing their own businesses.

The overseas Chinese model for the world through the practice of what is referred to as the Bamboo network (Deresky, 2008). Through this network the Chinese repatriate billions of dollars to their families and friends for business investments. AfroTrading is being positioned and marketed to the minorities in Western and Asian countries as the Online Chamber Commerce, through which they can communicate, network and promote their products and services to their home countries. This helps to facilitate the business process as immigrants who have not formalized their papers and therefore are restricted to travel, in countries where they are based yet can still make contacts and do business in any part of the world.

As an advertising tool: AfroTrading provides variety of advertising solutions to members and nonmembers, which include:

Monthly email newsletter ads.

Website ads: Skyscrapers, Popups, Banners, Buttons, Rich media.

General B2B network sponsorship.

Sponsorship of various (by industry sector) more information.

As a branding tool: Schweitzer (2009) noted that before you can create a compelling brand, or successfully market your product or service, it is essential to know whom your target consumers are and what they want, need, think and feel. Gained through quantitative and

qualitative research, consumer insights can supercharge your messaging, helping you capture the attention of your audience and sharpen your competitive edge. This is what we intend to do at AfroTrading, while being sensitive and specific to cultural peculiarities.

As event promoter: At AfroTrading, event organizers may post and promote upcoming events worldwide as well as receiving response on attendance, scheduling and traveling arrangements.

As a business intelligence tool: This is a special service designed to provide members specific business data, profiles, benefits and risk factors in a given country based on political, economic, legal and cultural environment of that country. This tool would help potential foreign investors to make informed decision regarding investments or partnership relationships in the given country.

To capture the interest of our target audience we will package and position the services and messages in a variety of ways depending on the need of a particular audience. In such cases, where within a company, there are purchasing and sales departments, depending on the targeted department or agent, AfroTrading online platforms will be positioned as the marketplace where purchasing agents can find a reliable variety of suppliers, or where sales agents may find potential and new buyers for their products. Therefore, in our advertising and marketing efforts, separate messages will be formulated for the respective target audience.

As an educational tool: As an educational instrument the AfroTrading online platforms allows students to become exposed to the realities and actual practice of international marketing and entrepreneurship. Students get to see and identify from a plethora of opportunities that are available to choose from by engaging in international marketing.

Students get to become familiar with country specific resources, local business rules, cultures and conditions in specific locations for business. Students will have access to resources that they can use and apply theory and practice to achieve business goals by making decisions and solving problems. Students will enhance their knowledge of the global environment and learn how to proactively develop skills needed for analyzing countries for successful business activity. Through the interaction platform students can exchange ideas and information about doing business in countries of their choice.

Consultancy services: The management board of AfroTrading is made up of experienced professionals and business experts. We double up as consultants who provide advice to prospective and existing entrepreneurs and businesses of International trade and business development for a fee. We represent and lead trade

missions to countries and mediate between interested parties. We help governments and communities make the right decisions in identifying investments opportunities and locating experts for implementing projects (Wickham and Wickham, 1995; Fombrun and Nevins, 2004).

As business developers: Another facet of AfroTrading is to engage as business facilitators and developers. We undertake different types of business undertakings. We practice what we preach by identifying profitable business opportunities ourselves as an avenue for generating revenue to sustain our activities. We form partnerships, contracts and distribute on behalf of companies globally. We can carry this out because we have first hand knowledge of companies in different countries and their needs. At AfroTrading.com, we want to encourage a culture of creativity and innovation. Allen (2007) noted that, entrepreneurship is a creative not a scientific process. This is what Afro trading is about. Keeping up with trends in the global environment through research to generate novel ideas for users, including entrepreneurs and scholars. We are well aware of the fact that it is the creativity in all aspects of the venture that sets the successful new businesses apart from that merely survive (Allen, 2007).

Marketing strategies

We are developing and adopting comprehensive marketing strategies, which we will continue to implement as the business evolves and grows. These include:

1. In-house marketing.
2. Marketing through agencies and experts

While we are seeking to develop contractual relationship with various marketing agencies and experts, we are concentrating meanwhile, on our in-house marketing strategies to save some cost. As the business grows with more revenue generated, we can then work more with the agencies.

In-House Marketing

Online marketing

Since AfroTrading is a web-based business, we therefore devote over 80% of our marketing efforts and budget to online marketing. This is the easiest and cheapest way to reach our potential customers worldwide.

The websites: www.afrotrading.com, www.afrotrading.net: The AfroTrading websites are our greatest marketing tools. Therefore we make every effort to make them as attractive as ever to catch the attention of potential customers at the first glance.

Based on prior research conducted at Oklahoma State University, they identified seven factors that customers might consider important in a business-to-business website.

Using a rigorous scale development procedure and a field study with 606 business customers, they developed valid and reliable scales for measuring these factors. Results revealed that organization is the most important factor in a website. This is followed by no transaction related interactivity, privacy/security and informativeness. The other factors (transaction related interactivity, personalization and entertainment) were found to be relatively less important. Managerially useful differences were found in the importance of ratings of these factors for those who use the web for purchase versus those who use the web for no purchase activities.

Therefore, in order to build a strong market for the website, we will focus on improving the organization of the website, interactivity, privacy/security and the format. In line with Moore's law, that computer power and efficiency will increase every 18 months we shall continue to update our services by constantly monitoring the feedback from existing members and potential customers on how we will continue to improve on the web site.

Based on several suggestions and feedbacks, we are updating and redesigning the website, which will offer better graphics and layout and more tools and features for members. The sites are now launched and operational.

Link exchange program: We have created a link exchange program, which allows us the exchange text links or banners with related websites. Companies or sites that are interested to link to us are required to complete the link exchange forms on the Afro trading sites. After complete review of the sites, we respond favorably to exchange links or banners or reject the offers. We also participate in link exchange programs, which are offered by other online advertising agencies like: MosterLinkSwap.com, ClixGalore etc.

Email marketing: With our unique strategy of collecting email addresses, we build database of prospects, which may be turned into customers later. We create special pages offering specific report or making special offers and then advertise such pages in related

publications and sites. In order to receive such free reports or offers, the prospects are required to provide their email addresses and contact information. By this method, we develop the database of email addresses without much concern about spamming and privacy issues.

Search engine listings and optimization: Afro trading is listed on most major and other minor search engines worldwide. Our technical departments are constantly reviewing the programming of the site, the key words and other elements that may improve the search optimization of the site. This helps to increase the traffic to site and the ratings on search engine.

Partner sites

Creation of Partner Sites is one of our major marketing strategies. It does not only help to build markets for Afro trading in the various regions, but it serves as another strategy for a company's expansion and developing partnership relationships. The Afro trading may be customized under a brand name to target a particular country, region or industry. It gives individuals, group of individuals or business entity to market the site in a given country as part of the broader management and operational network. Based on this model, we intend to create market for Afro trading in the following regions:

North America, Asia, Africa, South America, Europe, Middle East.

The operators of the partner sites are primarily responsible for the marketing of the website and the services in a given country or region. All partner sites use and share the same platform, tools, contents and data, but are customized individually according to the preference, style and taste of the operator. The partner sites share revenues with AfroTrading. All activities of the partner sites are monitored and controlled from the central site of AfroTrading. Therefore we can track and monitor the statistics of member's registration, trade leads and purchases of credits and product catalogs from each partner site from the central site. The revenue that is generated from each partner site is computed and the proportion of the commission due to each operator of a partner site is disbursed accordingly. Operators of partner sites may develop their own marketing strategies and means of generating revenue. AfroTrading shares only revenue that may be tracked and also per agreement with the operators of partner sites.

Offline marketing

At the moment, we are concentrating our efforts on line marketing due to financial constraint. As our financial situation continues to

improve, we will intensify our offline market. The Offline marketing strategies will be a combination of advertising, public relations and direct marketing.

We intend to work with advertising agencies, public relations and marketing experts to develop and execute respective strategies. For example, we are working on contractual relationship with local media outlets (Radio, Publications and Internet) to design advertising strategies and messages, which will be rolled out periodically. Currently, we are advertising and featuring Afro trading in the following publications, which are distributed to businesses, chambers of commerce and trade organizations around the globe:

Commercial news USA.

The export yellow pages.

We are reviewing proposals, which were submitted by various PR and Market experts to decide, which one might best achieve our public relations and marketing goals. In our ongoing marketing efforts, we are executing and perfecting in the following:

Establishing a corporate or market office.

Customer services.

Production of Marketing Materials.

Building relationship with trade organizations, chambers of commerce and government agencies.

Organizing Business Networking Meetings and Events.

Conclusion

Afro trading is not just about the websites, which we believe are a very useful tool for online networking, marketing and business exchange. It is more about vision for building one of the largest professional and business networks while providing the needed exposure in the global marketplace. AfroTrading is also about economic growth and development assistance for poorer countries. Entrepreneurs according to Schumpeter (1934) are development agents. Creating the entrepreneurial society therefore requires appropriate facilities and relevant support in many ways. One of such is the highly invaluable role information communication technology will play through tools like Afro trading for cost savings, minimizing risk and identifying profitable business opportunities through learning, making contacts and networks. We intend to explore business opportunities in the emerging markets, especially in Africa, Asia and other developing nations, building a revenue stream that would guarantee reasonable return on Investments for the Investors. The database of experts, professionals and business owners will also serve as useful resource center for education, research and consulting.

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