



EXPERT ADVICE

Going Global From Rural America

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The flattening of the world increasingly makes it possible for anyone to do business from anywhere, as author Thomas Friedman has pointed out. However, that doesn't mean place is irrelevant to business. In fact, it matters more than ever, according to author Richard Florida. At the intersection of Opportunity and Culture, the concepts of Friedman and Florida collide.

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Prior to the mid-1990s, the prospect of launching a globally minded company in rural America was, in a word, remote. However, times have changed. The Web now makes it possible for anyone to do business anywhere in the world. Small towns in America's heartland that have long been dependent on agribusiness, pine for tech-savvy companies that bring youth, energy and new economy revenue.

Low-interest loans, free buildings and outright cash grants are offered by economic development agencies as a means to recruit companies. Communities as small as 3,500 souls have been known to offer significant incentive packages to attract business within their borders. Toss in low operating costs, low cost of living and (in some cases) no taxes, and rural America offers a very positive business environment, indeed.

Supporting the "business can be done anywhere" theory is Pulitzer Prize-winning author [Tom Friedman](#). For several years, he has written extensively about globalization, a flattened earth and the leveling effects of the Web.

Conversely, [Richard Florida](#) (*Rise of the Creative Class* and *Who's Your City?*) contends that while it's possible to do business anywhere, "place" matters more than ever, and that certain places attract talent -- especially entrepreneurial talent.

So what's real and who's right? Has the Web made "place" less important, as Friedman contends? Can a company take advantage of the cost advantages of small-town America while simultaneously being a global business? And if so, what does it take to build a global company in a small town?

Global Image: Talking the Talk

Surprisingly, the most straightforward aspect of projecting a global image is marketing. With an experienced Web designer and stock photos, just about anyone can put up a Web site that feels global.

However, to really grab viewers in other languages, you will need to translate your Web site. To get your newly translated web site viewed in other regions, you'll then need to submit it to foreign language search engines. Unless you're a polyglot, it is best to engage a translation firm. When interviewing translators, inquire as to their experience in localization, as literal translations of business jargon and colloquialisms are often problematic.

As for regional [SEO](#), you are best served to hire a firm that specializes in regional search engines. With that, you'll have a global presence!

Walking the Walk

With a modest investment, you've now created a global image for your company. What happens next? With any luck, the phone rings, of course -- and here's where the rubber meets the road. No matter your location, if you're going to execute international business, you need *somebody* with global experience who can answer the phone. This brings us to the first significant challenge rural America faces in a global setting: people.

Of course, technically speaking, if the only issue you faced in rural America was finding someone to answer your phone in another language, you could outsource that function. However, that's not the real issue. The challenge is finding the right *people* in a very small *place* to support your global effort.

It's here, at the intersection of Opportunity and Culture, that the concepts of Friedman and Florida collide. Yes, thanks to the Web you can be in rural America, enjoy its low operating costs and build a global Web site. But can you get the *people*? Does the *place* support a global company in those intangible ways that will make or break your effort?

It's likely that the answer is "No." (Remember, we're talking about a *small* town, here.) That's the bad news, but it's not the end of the story. Rural America is well-known for its work ethic. Good people are out there, looking for exciting opportunities. However, they won't have the international experience you'd prefer out of the box.

This simply means you'll have to hire for attitude and train them up. Most importantly, it means that you'll need to bring the international experience and language skills to the table. After all, somebody has to answer the phone!

Pull further on the thread of hiring and training and you'll come to a fundamental issue -- the heart and soul of any company: your core values and mission.

Yes, yes. You've heard it all before as it relates to values and mission. Yet in a rural setting, where global reach is the goal, your core values and mission take on a different timbre. It's on this foundation that you'll hire, teach and train your team to fulfill your company's global brand promise.

Go Fishing

Keep in mind, you will be hiring staff who may have never traveled internationally, let alone speak a second language. Be sure to hire those who are excited by the prospects of "going global" from their small town. You simply can't have team members interacting with international customers who will make unknowing cultural gaffes or who will act as though it's their first rodeo.

As you build your company, it will fall on you to bring your global ethos to life. From the design of your offices to the magazines in the break room, you must create a work environment that subliminally reinforces your global worldview every step of the way.

Fair or not, there will be ongoing perception issues along the way. Oftentimes, there is a negative bias against small-town companies, as conventional wisdom mandates that a globally minded company should be located in an international city. Train your team to walk the walk and those biases will vanish.

Friedman is right: Anyone can do business from anywhere. With a modest investment, a global image can be projected from anywhere, thanks to the Web. However, Richard Florida is also right: Certain places are loaded with international talent, while others are not.

The trick in rural America is to build a team that can fulfill your brand promise with authenticity. Regardless of where you're located, that takes clarity, experience and a willingness to teach.

If you're prepared to take on the unique challenges of building a team in a small town, you can create a global brand, enjoy low operating costs and still be out fishing on the lake before dinner. **ECT**

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