

WP T2.4.1

Report on key lessons
from participant SME /
Project Team experience
of e-commerce supported
new market entry

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1. Rationale

This report focuses on the experiences of the Account Managers at the E-Channel Launchpads as they supported the participant SMEs in developing their e-commerce supported new market entry, including potential export as part of the ongoing cycle of SME reviews.

The Account Managers at the UK & FR Launchpads were highly experienced and worked closely with their participant SMEs in the following ways:

- a. Supporting a Data-Driven approach to e-commerce business development;
- b. Evolution of their business to support growth in e-commerce;
- c. Helping to build e-commerce into their strategic thinking.

In the bid, we said (p27):

The outcomes will be: The E-Channel Launchpads will support SMEs in developing their e-commerce supported export as part of the ongoing cycle of SME reviews. Account Managers in the UK & FR Launchpads will work closely with their participant SMEs in the following ways:

a) Data-Driven Business:

To ensure SMEs understand the metrics generated by the E-Channel platform and how this data can be used to adjust their marketing plans, product inventory/description, pricing, delivery, and the management and development of their business, to be the most competitive possible in the market.

b) Evolution of the business:

To review SME use of E-Channel tools (set up during on-boarding) and to make adjustments to optimise sales and operations. To also review additional E-Channel tools that can be added to their bespoke set and induct the SME into their use. E.g., To add the diffusion of their inventory to additional B2C marketplaces or adding B2B marketplace diffusion tools.

c) Strategy:

To ensure that SMEs are developing and managing their e-commerce export growth plans and strategies; that the SMEs are moving on their export journey from being intensively supported to being an active exporter.

This work will be managed by the Launchpad Account Manager with each SME (24) as part of the ongoing cycle of SME reviews.

2. Methodology

During their engagement with E-Channel, each participant SME had access to their own Launchpad Account Manager. Information was logged by the Launchpad Account Managers as part of the planned ongoing cycle of regular reviews of the SMEs' New Market Entry Plans (planned monthly but timed in line with SME availability). Any additional key data from interim meetings or conversations, via email, telephone, or remote teleconferencing, which both the SME or the Launchpad Account Manager could request, were also logged. From March 2020,

face-to-face meetings did not take place in the UK, due to Covid19 restrictions. In France, due to different Covid-19 restrictions, 50% of the French participant SMEs were able to meet with their Launchpad Account Manager, face to face, at least once, at the SMEs' own premises. The Launchpad Account Managers also had access to the SMEs' online data. Headlines and significant trends from this process were discussed monthly at the formal Project Management Meetings, attended by the CEOs of both Vertical Plus and Soledis, the Project Manager, the Project Coordinator, with a non-executive director from the Lead Partner as chair. The Launchpad Account Managers also attended these meetings or provided briefings. An update on the SMEs undertaking e-commerce supported new market entry with the support of the E-Channel Launchpads was a standing agenda item at these formal Project Management Meetings.

In addition, 3 questionnaires were used:

- SME Data Gathering Questionnaire¹ which benchmarked data
- Data Source Questionnaire²
- Brexit Questionnaires³

3. Key lessons from participant SMEs / project team experience of e-commerce supported export / new market entry

The E-Channel Launchpads supported SMEs in developing their e-commerce supported new market entry, including potential export, as part of the consultancy process. Both the participant SMEs and the Launchpad Account Managers faced challenges, issues, and positive outcomes from the consultancy, and as part of the E-Channel Coaching and Partnership Model.⁴

- The Launchpad Account Managers coached the SMEs in the use of E-Channel tools from their initial onboarding and induction, and then as part of the ongoing cycle of SME reviews, particularly in the use of Google Analytics.
- The Account Managers coached the SMEs in the use of the DMCP, which takes Google Analytics data and triangulates it with website data and product views, which when combined, produces a data set that can be effectively interrogated by the set of E-Channel tools, to inform business decisions and strategy. For example, product and inventory changes.

¹ The SME Data Gathering Questionnaire is available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/>

² The Data Source Questionnaire is available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/>

³ The Soledis and Vertical Plus Brexit Questionnaires are available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/>

⁴ A report on the [E-Channel Coaching and Partnership Mode](#) is available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/>

3.1 Lessons Learned: The main challenges faced by the Account Managers in supporting each SME as they went through the cycle of SME reviews

The main challenges faced by the Launchpad Account Managers in supporting each SME as they went through the cycle of SME reviews included:

1. Inconsistent SME engagement

One impact of Covid-19, from Spring 2020 to Autumn 2020, was that many SMEs had to adapt and restructure their business, organise their employees to work remotely, where possible, and mitigate against the challenges in their market sector, as the pandemic unfolded. As a result, the Launchpad Account Managers could not always contact key SME personnel, and meetings were more difficult to arrange. In both the UK and France, some SMEs adopted different working patterns, deploying staff in other areas or putting them on furlough (chomage partial). The Launchpad Account Managers could never be sure how much work, (if any, in some cases), the SME had been able to do between review meetings. At times, some of the SMEs were unavailable to engage with their Launchpad Account Managers, or they engaged inconsistently. This was due to two main reasons:

a) SME Focus and engagement:

Many of the participant SMEs faced periods of challenge and uncertainty and had to adapt and adjust as the Covid-19 situation unfolded, and so could not always give time planned to the project at agreed project meetings. The Launchpad Account Managers reported that the participant SME focus and engagement was therefore inconsistent. At times, the participant SMEs accomplished a lot of their New Market Entry Plans and made great strides and at other times, very little progress was made.

b) Availability of staff with appropriate key skills set

The SME's ability to keep their commitment to provide e-commerce relevant, competent staff to work with the Launchpad Account Manager to support each SME as they went through the cycle of SME reviews was an issue. For example, with FR SME 2 (Leisure Sector) staff were made redundant and not replaced.

It was not always possible for the participant SMEs to provide e-commerce relevant, competent staff with the relevant skills set, especially if the SME had been identified as lacking key technical skills. For example, the expectation from E-Channel FR was that the FR SMEs would make two people available, at 60% (basic requirement) for the development of their website, but it was very difficult, time-consuming, and costly, and this situation, including staff recruitment challenges, was exacerbated by the pandemic. Some French SMEs took on long-term trainees who did not have the relevant experience in online sales or web communication before they started.

2. Flexible Diary Management

The Launchpad Account Managers experienced challenges in their own diary management in trying to engage with the SMEs. They all reported that, at times, they had to work hard to re-book appointments with the SMEs, and keep the channels of communication open to ensure minimum drift. The Launchpad Account Managers found it frustrating that key contacts were sometimes unavailable, less available or they needed to have flexible diaries so they could change their meetings timetables at short notice, or use different communication channels. E.g., changing, often at short notice, from video conferencing, where they had set up shared screens to support an SME, and talk them through a technical issue, to a phone call, where this type of support was much harder to give.

3. Time Management

The Launchpad Account Managers acknowledged that they gave more time than anticipated to coaching and supporting the participant SME in their development of technical skills than was originally planned and sometimes more than was anticipated from the on-boarding stage. The remote working, an impact of Covid-19, slowed the consultancy process. A time-consuming part of the Launchpad Account Managers role was finding ways to support the SMEs when, despite the SMEs enthusiasm and goodwill, their level of technical competence, sometimes coupled with their availability to attend (virtual) meetings, was often far from optimal for the intensive work to take the SMEs to where the Launchpad Account Managers wanted them to be.

4. Sensitivity to SME Core Business

The Account Managers gave feedback that all the participant SMEs recognised that the E-Channel project was an opportunity to receive training and support with their data and their website. During these uncertain and turbulent times, the SMEs often faced dilemmas over project focus v business focus. There were times when the SMEs were not always project-focussed, which created challenges for the Account Managers in engaging with them. Some SMEs remained focused on their physical shops as they attempted to weather Covid-19. The Account Managers reported the importance of trying to be sensitive to the needs and situation of the SMEs. There was a balance between knowing how much support to give with how much support they felt the SME could handle at any one time. At times, a lighter touch was necessary as an SME might not be in a position to digest the advice or action it. It was important to try to factor in how the SMEs' core business was faring as this, rightly, was often the SMEs' main focus, or could become so rapidly if problems arose. The Launchpad Account Managers agreed that it was paramount to be flexible in their engagement with the participant SMEs.

5. Formal v informal communication and relationships

Building trust and good communications was a key success factor for the Launchpad Account Managers. However, the Launchpad Account Managers reported that they found it more challenging, and it took longer to build relationships with the participant SMEs when there were no, or few, face-to-face meetings. This was often a different working practice for the participant SMEs. The Launchpad Account Managers reported that they felt it took a lot longer to strike the right balance between being formal, professional, and 'business-like' with a more informal and friendly tone when video-conferencing.

6. Technical support

The majority of SMEs did not have sufficient tracking analytics in place, which required more preliminary work than anticipated. The Launchpad Account Managers worked proactively with the SMEs, talking them through the steps required, where necessary, to help them get these vital tracking tools in place.

Once these were in place, work could begin on optimising marketing and other key activities to improve sales.

These key activities included:

- Improving their websites / product range / descriptions;
- Social media / marketing;
- Choosing and deploying paid marketing, once their site was a good position, to push more traffic to it;
- Adding positive reviews and more product information to the site;

Due to a lack of technical understanding, technical skills, level of understanding of their data as well as their basic e-commerce infrastructure set up e.g., not having sufficient knowledge and

understanding of data tools including Google Analytics, the Launchpad Account Managers needed to factor in additional time to give the participant SMEs much more technical support than had been anticipated, especially on data and inventory, which was more complicated and took longer to do remotely. The Launchpad Account Managers agreed that technical support was easier in a face-to-face context, as this allows them to show and explain to the SME on their own computers, using their own systems, face-to-face. While it was possible to share screens etc, the Launchpad Account Managers found remote working with the SME more time-consuming.

7. Technical support overload

The Launchpad Account Managers sometimes had to balance their desire to support the SME with the amount of time and commitment the SME was able to give to engage with the Launchpad Account Managers (which varied at different stages of the project). The Launchpad Account Managers were mindful of not giving the SMEs a technical support overload.

8. SME independence v overreliance on the Launchpad Account Managers

The Launchpad Account Managers reported that by the end of their consultancy period, many of the SMEs still lacked technical competence, some were not yet fully confident, and some still wanted the Launchpad Account Managers to take the lead. The Launchpad Account Managers wanted the SMEs to become independent in the use and interrogation of their own data to drive their new market aspirations. While the Launchpad Account Managers tried hard to support the participant SMEs, in retrospect, with a significant number of SMEs, there was a fine balance between providing support and SME over-reliance on the Launchpad Account Managers.

9. Other risks

The Launchpad Account Managers on both sides of the Channel reported that there was general uncertainty, even without Brexit and Covid-19, (UK SMEs were more impacted by Brexit uncertainty). The Launchpad Account Managers were experienced enough to know that SMEs always face risks as well as opportunities when running their own business, let alone seeking to grow it.

10. Outside the project remit

The Launchpad Account Managers were very often asked for their advice and support on services outside the scope of the project. In retrospect, it can be seen that this was, in part, due to the close ties and positive relationship the Launchpad Account Managers were building with the participant SMEs as part of the consultancy. The Launchpad Account Managers were possibly over-obliging, but they appreciated the participant SME involvement, despite the challenging times and wanted to give them a positive experience, and guide them on their path to success. For example, both the French and UK Launchpad Account Managers were asked if they could redesign the SMEs website and for their opinion on different software. The UK Launchpad Account Managers were also asked to take product photographs, for their advice on marketing and promotional campaigns and to create some quick and easy video content to showcase their products to share on social media.

3.2 Lessons Learned: Data-Driven Business Overview

11. Training and support for Data-Driven Business

To further support the SMEs, the UK Launchpad Account Managers shared examples of reports from tools such as Google Analytics, with commentary about how to interpret the data, and coached the SMEs with use and interpretation of Google Analytics, as part of their new market entry plans. Both the French and UK Launchpad Account Managers reported that the majority of the participant SMEs were open and receptive to making changes as a result of the consultancy, and were happy to take the advice of their Launchpad Account Managers. The Launchpad Account Managers reported that, after the intensive support received as part of the cycle of SME reviews, the participant SMEs had a better understanding of their data and the metrics generated by the E-Channel DMCP platform. For the first time, a significant number of the participant SMEs had a better understanding of what they wanted their websites to do, what data was available to support their businesses, and what data analysis they could do. While this was a positive outcome, the Launchpad Account Managers reported that, in some cases, trying to get the SME to take the lead and embed the uses of the data in their own business planning was impacted by distractions, including Covid-19 and Brexit (UK).

12. Short term wins v long-term strategy

The UK and French Launchpad Account Managers agreed it was important to support the SME journey from short-term firefighting to long-term thinking. Most importantly, the Launchpad Account Managers reported that the SMEs needed to see short-term wins, as they were faced with so much uncertainty before they could think longer term. The UK Launchpad Account Managers reported that Post Brexit trading conditions also significantly impacted the SMEs' longer-term plans to enter international / EU markets. Some of the SMEs were affected by supply chain import difficulties e.g., either with components to make their products or with products from the EU to sell in the UK such as clothing and accessories.⁵ These were both import and export issues.

13. The impact of Covid-19 on long-term strategy

As a result of Covid-19, some of the SMEs tried to do more business online but found that they did not have the systems, software, or experienced staff to do this as successfully as they hoped. The Launchpad Account Managers agreed that Covid-19 impacted the balance between the SMEs' long-term development work and their short-term opportunism and that, as a result, it was harder for them to shift the SMEs towards longer-term, strategic thinking. Many of the SMEs had to react to the ongoing pandemic situation quickly and so did not always have the consistent and significant capacity to think long term or strategically. The long-term plans they already had were having to be reconsidered in the content of Covid-19, and there were other challenges such as dealing with the challenges to mental health and family well-being during the long lockdown period of winter 2020/21.

14. Data-Driven Business links to social media

The Launchpad Account Managers also agreed that the SMEs were more successful if they were using social media to their best advantage. One UK Launchpad Account Manager demonstrated to an SME how their data could be used to adjust their marketing plans, product description, pricing, and delivery to be the most competitive possible in the market.

⁵ A report on Post Brexit trading conditions and the impact on SMEs is available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/>

3.3 Lessons Learned: Evolution of the business

From the initial review of the SMEs' use of E-Channel tools (set up during on-boarding), adjustments were made to optimise sales and operations. The Account Managers were able to help the SME make these adjustments. The Account Managers reported that the adjustments required varied significantly between SMEs.

15. Tools outside of the scope of the project

Table 1 clarifies the definition of bespoke and additional tools.

Tools	Definitions
Bespoke tools	Tools the SMEs use, from the set relevant to their business and context.
Additional tools	Tools the SMEs asked for, to do things that could not be done using the E-Channel toolset.

Table 1: Definition of bespoke and additional tools

The Account Managers reported that, at times, some SMEs asked them for tools that were outside of the scope of the project. For example, additional B2B diffusion tools. The Account Managers agreed that, as Diffusion activities attracted cost, they were dealt with outside of the scope of the project. In some cases, activities that required investment by SMEs were dealt with directly by the SMEs themselves.

16. Websites and software

The Launchpad Account Managers realised that many of the SMEs were using outdated website building and hosting software. Many of the SMEs did not want to pay for upgrades as they were unsure what they wanted. Technical problems with websites led to delays in the implementation of the SME DMCP use and specific situations. For example, advice based on data which would drive the SMEs' New Market Entry Plans). Advice given by the Launchpad Account Managers was actioned but led to delays in product and marketing launches, and measuring results.

17. DMCP Tool traction and impact

The Launchpad Account Managers agreed that the marketing opportunities tool in the DMCP had a major impact, as it provided the SMEs with the ability to work on products immediately to improve their sales (quick wins). The Launchpad Account Managers agreed that there was a common pattern in the timeframe in which the SMEs used the tools and that they focussed on quick wins before long-term gains.

- The SMEs started by using the Marketing Opportunities Tool to take fast action to capitalise on their current situation, so it was an effective, quick win which then gave them confidence in the process and was, therefore, a stepping stone to the next steps.
- Other tools such as the Profit and Loss Tool sometimes required larger pieces of work to populate with the data so were seen by the SMEs as a medium-term goal.
- The Business Growth Tool was also popular, as it allowed the SMEs to garner an overview of sales performance over longer periods.

18. DMCP Tools - ease of use

The Launchpad Account Managers agreed that, once the DMCP tools had been configured, they provided self-explanatory reports for the SME, which were designed to be as user-friendly as possible as the aim was for SMEs to access and use them remotely. The main issue was if there was not enough data for the tool to provide useful output. This data also had to be pertinent, for example, to include the number of sales and products. In those examples where there was not enough quality data, the Account Managers found it useful to discuss, explain and show examples to the SMEs of how data could be used.

3.4 Lessons Learned: Strategy

The Launchpad Account Managers provided extensive support to the participant SMEs on their e-commerce New Market Entry journey. It was paramount that the SMEs actively engaged in short-term and medium-term e-commerce new market activity as this helped them identify and explore longer-term opportunities and strategies.

19. Independent SMEs

The Launchpad Account Managers reported that, while active SME engagement in new market activity was achieved, it was too soon to evaluate how far the SMEs would continue this activity once the intensive support period came to an end. They also questioned whether the SMEs would do this independently after the project finished. Some of the participant SMEs were not confident about how to achieve long-term or overall aims; to survive in the short term, they needed to be flexible and responsive to their market situation, to mitigate against Covid-19. Other SMEs, while happy to engage, and to follow the consultancy advice, did not take the steps to become independent because it was easier, while the project was running, to rely on a third party, such as the E-Channel Launchpad Account Managers. Post-project, this approach may translate to seeking ongoing support from other e-commerce support providers. However, by this stage, the participant SMEs were equipped with greater knowledge and understanding of the different facets of e-commerce and so had a better idea of the type of support they were looking for.

20. Identifiable indicators of transition

The Launchpad Account Managers reported that they saw identifiable indicators of transition by the SMEs to become more independent during their consultancy period although Covid-19 and Brexit made this harder to judge.

- The Launchpad Account Managers agreed that the dynamic between themselves and the participant SME changed during their consultancy period.
- One indicator of this change was that, apart from the planned, formal review meetings, the amount of contact initiated by the SME during the intensive support of the consultancy period, for example, additional, interim meetings or conversations via email, telephone, or remote teleconferencing, decreased towards the end of this process.
- With the planned ongoing cycle of formal monthly reviews with the SMEs of their New Market Entry Plans, the Launchpad Account Managers could monitor how much work the SMEs had undertaken independently, including how far they had been able to apply any new technical competence e.g to interrogating their data.
- The Launchpad Account Managers agreed that the SMEs started asking more questions and asking for clarification in technical areas and checking their understanding. Over this

intensive period of support, they gained confidence and were motivated as they could see the impact of the tools and how they could be used to interpret their own data.

4. Summary

The Launchpad Account Managers agreed that, once the SMEs had been presented with the New Market Entry Plan and the model and processes envisaged by them:

- Some SMEs were keener than others to start work immediately on their New Market Entry Plans, but they all required monitoring, encouragement, and flexible communication by the Launchpad Account Managers;
- Some SMEs said they could not do all the work, or do it within the time frame of the project, for reasons such as budget, staffing, time, needing to focus on other things. E.g., Brexit, Covid-19 or their physical shops, and so required more short-term and medium-term planning support from the Launchpad Account Managers;
- Most of the SMEs were willing to sort out what they perceived as the basic “bread and butter” elements of e-commerce such as their websites and inventory, to put them in a stronger position to carry on at a later date. This was a crucial piece of work for the Launchpad Account Managers and the basis from which the SMEs’ e-commerce aspirations would grow;
- With the support of the Launchpad Account Managers, many of the participant SMEs achieved early or ‘easy’ wins and so gained the confidence to go further and think about a longer-term e-commerce plan;
- The Launchpad Account Managers were happy with the outcomes from the additional technical support they had given the SMEs. Although by the end of their intensive consultancy period, many of the SMEs still lacked confidence in accessing their own data, they had a much better understanding to use it;
- The E-Channel Launchpad Account Managers signposted further support for those participant SMEs who were hesitant about moving forward independently;

The Launchpad Account Managers reflected that the SME e-commerce new market entry journey can be a long one and is not always a straight path. Their role required patience and flexibility and they drew on their experience of supporting clients, including SMEs, across a range of e-commerce supported activities.

The Launchpad Account Managers were positive that one project outcome was that, because they engaged with the participant SMEs, those SMEs had the support and guidance to use their data to plan accordingly for the future, despite Brexit, Covid-19, and other unknown challenges.

The Launchpad Account Managers were positive that the participant SMEs had, for the most part, tried to take their advice and focussed their efforts, where required, to develop their own e-commerce systems and processes. Some of the participant SMEs started over with e-commerce as their previous experiences were not strategic, and some started from scratch.

The Launchpad Account Managers were positive that they achieved considerable success in their support of the participant SMEs, in the short and medium-term. A longer-term key measure of success will be the overall impact of their work with the participant SMEs, and how far these SMEs go on to meet their aspirations and their future e-commerce ambitions.

Appendix 1

Overview of the 20 key lessons learned by the Launchpad Account Managers interaction with the participant SMEs in developing their e-commerce ambitions by heading.		
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