

Buyers are greener, older, more demanding than ever

Concern for the environment and increased life expectancy open new markets

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Successful international exporters are always on the lookout for new opportunities. A consumer trend in one country can create a market out of the blue; a change in regulations in another may mean that a new set of business services are quickly in hot demand.

But what deeper, underlying trends are likely to drive overseas sales for International Track 200 companies in the 2020s and beyond?

One trend is so widespread that it's hidden in plain sight. Business

people are consumers too, and as consumers they are now used to enjoying perfectly executed services – ordering products quickly via their phones, with convenient delivery and brilliant customer service.

Seamless buying experiences are increasingly expected in the business-to-business arena too – and in international trade, offering them provides a valuable commercial advantage.

Take Edinburgh-based Vegware (No 37) – a DHL business-to-business customer whose compostable cutlery, cups and takeaway containers are made from plant-based materials. Strong sales to the world's largest contract caterers and distributors helped expand its exports from an annualised £3.5m in 2017 to £11.4m in 2019.

“There is no doubt that demand for shorter lead times and next-day delivery expectations have grown as a result of consumer expectation,” says its

founder, Joe Frankel. “This has carried over into the business sector, with a move to just-in-time deliveries seen across many industries and fast becoming the norm in our own.”

Sustainability is itself an extraordinarily influential trend, with businesses under pressure to make their supply chains greener and show tangible reductions in their carbon footprint.

“Vegware is now sold in 70 countries,” says Joe, who launched the firm after seeing a spoon made from corn and potato at a San Francisco farmer's market.

“We help food service establishments meet their sustainability goals, and also offer expert waste support.

“We are seeing major growth around the world as communities, cities and countries ban polystyrene foam containers, with a fresh wave of interest from European clients ahead of the EU directive on single-use plastics.”

At DHL we are striving to



Vegware founder Joe Frankel has seen exports for his compostable goods soar to £11.4m in 2019

be carbon-neutral by 2050 and already have clean transport solutions in place, including our GoGreen logistics option for companies looking to offset their carbon footprint, and our fleet of electric vans.

The rapid evolution of e-commerce, whether business-to-business or business-to-consumer, is another key trend to stay attuned to, with incredible export opportunities awaiting UK companies. Businesses such as Cult Beauty (No 35) and Bulk Powders (No 114) are thriving in this space.

Sigma Sports (No 6), which sells cycling and triathlon gear worldwide, was launched in 1992 as an accessories shop in Surrey. Co-founders, Jason Turner and Ian Whittingham, were among the first to sell heart monitors to UK cyclists.

Sponsorship has been a key part of its marketing plan, including lending a bike to Sir Bradley Wiggins when the Linda McCartney Racing Team folded in 2001.

Yet it wasn't until 2014 that Sigma began leveraging its reputation online to drive sales around the world – its exports grew to an annualised £7.2m in 2018.

“The exciting thing for us is that we have grown our international sales without doing any specific promotion or advertising. We created rich and unique content, so our customers found us organically,” says Ian. “That said, we are about to start paid search activity in Europe and we are also internationalising our site with content in French, German and Spanish.

“Working with DHL Express has been a real game-changer for our international business and we are constantly amazed by the speed of delivery.”

Also driving future export sales will be the increased longevity of populations. This will drive demand for medicines, gene-testing kits and smart home technology such as fridges that track expiry dates. Expect more

success for firms such as Cirencester's Corin Group (No 171) – which recently acquired Australia's largest manufacturer of hip and knee implants, and nearly doubled overseas sales from £59.5m in 2016 to £106.2m in 2018.

However, post-Brexit trade arrangements are settled, there are sure to be new challenges for UK exporters. At DHL we are focused on helping exporters manage the practicalities of moving towards a new trading environment. We're working closely with EU and British legislators, highlighting issues that matter to our customers.

We will continue to provide International Track 200 companies with the tools they need to get ahead of the curve on global trends and seize the many opportunities available overseas. For now, congratulations to them all on a job well done.

Ian Wilson is chief executive of DHL Express UK & Ireland