

A crash course in cross-border e-commerce

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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As the CEO of [Mall for Africa](#), the continent's largest online shopping platform, Nigeria-born Chris Folayan knows a thing or two about creating experiences that keep online consumers coming back for more.



Chris Folayan, founder and CEO, Mall for Africa

The business began operating from his spare bedroom in 2011 and has since evolved into an online empire, selling over 8.5 billion items across 20,000 categories from more than 150 stores. The 'global mall' acts as a middleman between US and UK retailers and consumers in Africa's emerging markets, providing top international brands with access to an often hard-to-reach consumer base.

At last week's eCommerce MoneyAfrica Confex held in Cape Town, Folayan shared practical advice on how to facilitate an international online shopping experience, with top tips on identifying the nuances that exist between different regions and how to cater to the consumers within them.

Cross-border website design

Building a better online environment for cross-border trade begins with site design and **colour** is a big part of this. "Colour should be used to give your website personality," he said. For Mall for Africa, light blue has tended to work well on kids' sites whereas darker tones have proved successful with shoes and clothing. He also said to stay away from reds and yellows, and if you're able to use GEO IP to modify colour according to region that's a bonus.

Images are equally important but it's vital to look at the environment that you plan to sell in and take note of regional preferences. "Images from one country might not always go off well in another. Risqué images, for example, won't do too well in the Middle East."

An interesting point that was echoed by a number of other speakers is that an **offline** presence is often required to prosper in online business. According to Folayan, having a tangible presence in the country you're selling in – whether a billboard or an ad in a newspaper – goes a long way in building credibility and value for one's online brand, especially in emerging markets.

Customer focus and support

When it comes to customer focus, **personalisation** and **customisation** are key; and with the wealth of data available it needn't be rocket science. Personalised contact can be as simple as using a customer's name and surname in email communication, said the Mall for Africa CEO. He also said that profiling users into groups allows you to target them – for example, a female with a newborn baby boy – with suitable advertising.

"Use click-through intelligence to find out how your customer is navigating your site, and use that to create customised messages. A simple 'Hey, we noticed you forgot this in your shopping cart' has helped many e-commerce sites do better."

Moving on to customer support, Folayan rated the three main cross-border communication methods from good, to better to best.

Emails are good but messages, no matter how simple they are, are not always interpreted the same in different regions. "If you're going to be doing cross-border trade and utilising mainly email as support you'll probably need a different email format for West Africa than you would for the Middle East, for example. And if any images are used you'll need to once again consider if they're appropriate for that country."

Online chat is better because it involves one-on-one communication with the customer in real-time, but Folayan said phone calls have proven to be best, noting that the ROI on **phone calls** is about five times what it would be with email.

Aside from having service agents that speak in a language and accent understandable by the customer, Folayan also urged companies to utilise services that allow local calls to be accessed from an external location at a cheap rate. "A 10-minute call for 10 cents will have the customer coming back to you over and over again."



Localising your site

Folayan strongly urged conference delegates dabbling in the e-commerce space to localise their site in the following five ways.

Payment methods: Look at the mobile and non-mobile payment options accepted within each region and make sure the dominant ones are accepted on your site. “If you are in Kenya for example and you don’t accept mPesa, good luck to you,” he quipped.

Language: Aside from ensuring content is translated according to the main language spoken in each country, Folayan also said to leverage local slang. “We’ve noticed that ads incorporating local lingo and slang tend to do much better than those with a more British or American tone.”

SEO targeting: Research what people in specific regions are searching for and then localise SEO accordingly. Utilising local lingo will also improve your organic search rankings. “If you’re going to have an impact all over the world you have to look at each country you’re trading in. Localise language and slang SEO based on the country you are trying to reach.”

Local celebrities: Involving local celebrities in your marketing and advertising arouses interest and shows that your site is part of a global family. “It’s one thing to be Macy’s in America, but to be Macy’s in Kenya or Ghana brings people in and helps them feel like the company has an interest in their country.”

Local events: A simple and effective way to give your brand visibility and relevance is to leverage local events. “Put your logo on local events and people will not only see your brand is in their country, but they’ll see the brands as part of their environment.”

Rewards push sales

Folayan is a proponent of using rewards to push online sales, but there are some strategies that work better than others, and one in particular that doesn’t seem to work at all.

Discounts – especially those upwards of 20% off – work well and Mall for Africa has seen positive feedback and improved sales from utilising them. The ‘**buy more, save more**’ strategy, he said, works even better. For example: spend R300 and get R50 off, but get R100 off when you spend for R600. The sales strategy that’s proved the most effective for Mall for Africa and its clients is the **loyalty programme**. “It keeps people engaged with the company and is a little bit like getting married to the customer.”

But Folayan warned to stay away from **FREE**. “This is the quickest way to kill your company. Once customers use it, they’ll simply wait until they get it again, and will likely not purchase until they get the same deal.”

Logistics

Based on customer surveys, Folayan laid out the top five logistics priorities for online shopping retail businesses. **Shipping speed**, unsurprisingly, was voted as most important - the faster the customer gets the product the more likely they are to buy. Secondly, customers want to be able to track their product, so having a **tracking system** in place is important.

Easy returns comes in at third place and is a promise that needs to be stated clearly on your website, not hidden in an email or the FAQs. Having good **local support**, as detailed earlier, should be the fourth priority; and lastly, clearing products from **import duties** so that your customers don’t have to.

Ultimately, noting that one in every five online transactions will be done through global e-commerce by 2020, Folayan affirmed that cross-border trade is becoming an increasingly good business space to be in.

The [eCommerce MoneyAfrica Confex](#) took place at the Cape Town International Convention Centre on 22 and 23 February.

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