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# Up Our Game, Canada! Accelerate Your International Expansion Beyond the U.S.

A framework & playbook template for Canadian SMEs expanding internationally

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# Objective: Empower Your SME's International Expansion

- Provide your top management team with a data-driven, Framework & a Playbook Template to confidently navigate international expansion, turning tariff challenges into growth opportunities
- Framework: Your blueprint for internationalization success
- Playbook Template: Standardized structure for creating your playbooks - a detailed set of instructions, best practices, & guidelines specifically tailored to a business scenario

# Why Canadian SMEs Must Internationalize Now

- Expanding internationally is no longer an option – it's a necessity
- Reduce reliance on the U.S.
- Trade agreements give Canadian SMEs preferential access to over 1.5 billion consumers
- Digital transformation enables cost-effective expansion
- Foreign competitors will dominate the local markets of Canadian SMEs that do not expand internationally
- Government support & export incentives reduce expansion risks
- AI-driven marketing & international logistics solutions make it easier than ever to reach & serve international customers

# Agenda

1. Key Insight Groups from Research – Unlocking International Success
2. Framework for Canadian SMEs
3. Playbook Template for Canadian SMEs
4. Benefits & addressing challenges
5. Executive summary – Takeaways & your next steps

# 1. Key Insight Groups from Research – Unlocking International Success

28 key insights extracted from 17 research articles organized into:

- Group 1: Overcome barriers
- Group 2: Digitalization – Your gateway to internationalization
- Group 3: Digital transformation – Reinvent your business for international success
- Group 4: Strategic market entry – Maximize opportunities, minimize risks
- Group 5: Scaling through partnerships & trade blocks – Build your international network

## Group 1: Overcome Barriers

- Common barriers to SME internationalization include lack of knowledge about foreign markets, regulatory complexities, & financial constraints
- Export promotion agencies & robust market intelligence (competitive analysis, customer insights) are vital resources, providing training, financial assistance, infrastructure development, & guidance for successful foreign market entry

## Group 2: Digitalization – Your Gateway to Internationalization

- Digital platforms (e-commerce, social media) dramatically reduce entry barriers, lower internationalization costs by 30-40%, & enable rapid market testing & international reach
- SMEs using digital trade platforms see 28% faster tariff adaptation & 19% lower compliance costs – a significant competitive advantage
- AI, cloud computing, & predictive analytics optimize supply chains & target customers with precision
- By embracing digital technologies, Canadian SMEs can overcome traditional size & resource limitations, achieving awareness, service innovation, & mass customization

## Group 3: Digital Transformation – Reinvent Your Business for International Success

- Digitalization is about transforming your business model, not just about e-commerce
- Successful internationalizing SMEs integrate digital strategies across their entire operation, creating a significant competitive advantage
- Digital transformation differentiates successful internationalizing SMEs from those that struggle
- SMEs must align their transformation efforts with their overall internationalization strategies to maximize efficiency & effectiveness



## Group 4: Strategic Market Entry – Maximize Opportunities, Minimize Risks

- SMEs use diverse international strategies: exporting, joint ventures, licensing, digital channels
- Exporting is dominant (62%), hybrid models (joint ventures + licensing) boost resilience by 22% because they diversify risks across different control & resource commitments
- Multi-country diversification cuts U.S. tariff exposure by 34% compared to single-market strategies
- Diversification mitigates over-reliance on any single market, including U.S.
- Digital-first entry (e-commerce, social selling) minimizes upfront investment & risks
- Cultural & regulatory differences require SMEs to adapt strategies for various markets

## Group 5: Scaling Through Partnerships & Trade Blocks – Build Your International Network

- SMEs with formalized international networks achieve 2.1x faster revenue growth post-entry relative to those that expand without partnerships, relying on ad-hoc market entry strategies
- Digital ecosystem participation (e.g., Alibaba, Amazon Global Selling) correlates with 37% higher export survival rates)
- Role of trade agreements & economic partnerships is becoming more critical as international trade patterns shift
- Canada's participation in major trade blocks like the CPTPP, CETA, & USMCA provides access to 1.5 billion consumers worldwide

## 2. Framework for Canadian SMEs

Key components:

- A. Strategic market research – Identify & prioritize high-growth markets
- B. Digital enablement & e-commerce strategy
- C. Navigating regulations & minimizing risk
- D. Financial planning & maximizing government support
- E. Strategic partnerships & scalable distribution networks

## A. Strategic market research – Identify & prioritize high-growth markets

- Identify & prioritize markets with the best trade agreements & lowest tariff risks
- Choose the most effective market entry strategy: direct export, digital platforms, strategic alliances, or licensing
- Leverage AI-driven market intelligence to accelerate decision-making & optimize market selection

## B. Digital Enablement & E-Commerce Strategy

- Expand international reach using top digital marketplaces like Amazon, Alibaba, & Shopify
- Drive international sales with targeted digital marketing & localized content
- Automate customer acquisition & engagement using AI-powered tools

## C. Navigating Regulations & Minimizing Risk

- Emphasize the proactive nature of navigating regulations & risk mitigation, not just reactive compliance
- Engage legal & trade experts to ensure full compliance with all relevant international trade regulations, minimizing legal risk
- Diversify market focus to reduce dependency on U.S. markets & mitigate tariff risks

## D. Financial Planning & Maximizing Government Support

- Secure funding through Canadian export programs like EDC financing, CanExport grants, & trade insurance
- Implement hedging strategies to protect against currency fluctuations & trade uncertainties
- Optimize cost structures by leveraging tax incentives & government-backed trade benefits
- Increase ROI from government support programs & strategic financial planning

## E. Strategic Partnerships & Scalable Distribution Networks

- Establish alliances with regional distributors & logistics partners to streamline market entry
- Strengthen brand presence by forming joint ventures & co-branding opportunities
- Use AI-driven supply chain analytics to optimize distribution efficiency
- Establish different types of partnerships that cover distribution, technology, & marketing



### 3. Playbook Template for Canadian SMEs

Steps:

- 1. Pre-entry** – Conducts market research, competitor analysis, risk assessment, & AI adoption to identify optimal entry strategies
- 2. Enter new market** – Establishes a cost-effective presence through exports, e-commerce, partnerships, or local operations.
- 3. Build local partnerships & streamline supply chain** – Enhances market positioning by partnering with distributors, suppliers, & logistics providers to improve efficiency & reduce risks
- 4. Utilize Canadian government export support & ensure regulatory compliance** – Leverages trade agreements, financial incentives, & export programs to lower costs, & navigate regulations
- 5. Continuously monitor, analyze, & improve performance** – Uses data-driven KPIs & customer insights to refine strategies, optimize operations, & scale effectively <sup>17</sup>

## Step 1: Pre-Entry

- Set clear internationalization goals & define measurable KPIs
- Analyze high-potential markets based on trade agreements, tariff structures, & competitive landscapes
- Leverage AI-driven tools to accelerate market research & uncover data-driven insights
- Select the most effective entry strategy—direct export, partnerships, digital platforms, or licensing
- Develop a digital-first internationalization strategy for cost-effective expansion

## Step 2: Enter New Market

- Emphasize the agile & data-driven approach to market entry – launch, learn, & refine
- Launch in new markets using global e-commerce platforms like Amazon, Alibaba, & Shopify
- Localize branding, websites, & marketing campaigns to engage regional customers
- Optimize pricing models by accounting for tariffs, logistics, & regional costs
- Implement automated digital marketing campaigns to accelerate customer acquisition
- Refine your entry approach based on real-time sales & customer insights

## Step 3: Build Local Partnerships & Streamline Supply Chain

- Secure distributor agreements, joint ventures, or alliances to strengthen market entry
- Build long-term relationships & cultural sensitivity in partnerships
- Engage with local trade associations & business networks to build credibility
- Optimize supply chain operations using AI-driven logistics & real-time tracking
- Reduce operational risks by diversifying suppliers & transportation channels
- Expand regional reach by leveraging government-backed business matching programs

## Step 4: Utilize Canadian Government Export Support & Ensure Regulatory Compliance

- Apply for financial incentives, grants, & trade support programs like Export Development Canada (EDC), CanExport, & Trade Commissioner Services (TCS)
- Ensure compliance with international trade regulations by working with legal experts
- Monitor trade policy changes & proactively adjust market strategies
- Secure intellectual property protections to safeguard brand assets
- Work with trade advisors & government agencies to streamline export documentation

## Step 5: Continuously Monitor, Analyze & Improve Performance

- Track sales growth, customer feedback, & market penetration using real-time analytics
- Use AI-powered forecasting to refine marketing, supply chain, & pricing strategies
- Expand to additional markets by leveraging performance insights & playbook adjustments
- Adapt products & services to meet evolving regional demands & customer preferences
- Strengthen international brand recognition through continuous innovation & localized engagement

## 4. Benefits & Addressing Challenges

- A. Key Benefits of the Internationalization Framework
- B. Addressing Challenges of the Internationalization Framework
- C. Key Benefits of the Playbook Template
- D. Addressing Challenges of the Playbook Template

## A. Key Benefits of the Internationalization Framework

- Framework reduces uncertainty by providing a step-by-step roadmap, helping SMEs confidently enter new markets
- Encourages the use of AI, e-commerce platforms, & automation, reducing costs & operational inefficiencies while improving scalability
- Helps SMEs navigate tariffs, trade laws, & regulatory requirements, reducing legal risks & compliance challenges
- Positions SMEs to leverage trade agreements (CPTPP, CETA, USMCA) & international networks, ensuring sustainable market penetration
- Recommends AI-powered analytics & market intelligence tools to support data-driven expansion strategies



# Addressing Challenges of Internationalization Framework

Challenge	How to Address
Significant change in mindset & digital adaptation required	Provide ongoing support & training to help SMEs integrate AI, digital tools, & automation smoothly
Framework needs tailoring for industry-specific needs	Offer industry-specific case studies, AI-driven market analysis, & expert consultation to refine strategies based on sector-specific needs
Country-specific regulations require additional research	Recommend leveraging trade advisors, local partners, & government-supported trade missions to address regulatory complexities
Low digital literacy & outdated infrastructure hinder adoption	Offer step-by-step digital adoption guides, access to government-funded tech grants, & AI-based training modules for smooth integration
Risk of over-reliance on government incentives	Encourage SMEs to combine government support with revenue diversification strategies, private investment, & organic growth initiatives

## C. Key Benefits of the Playbook Template

- Provides a step-by-step guide from market assessment to post-entry adaptation, simplifying international expansion
- Customizable to SME needs, allowing businesses to document their own strategies & operational workflows
- Ideal for first-time exporters, reducing barriers for SMEs with limited international experience
- Tracks performance in real-time, using built-in KPIs & progress monitoring tools
- Enhances team alignment & training, ensuring consistency in execution & knowledge sharing

# Addressing Challenges of Internationalization Playbook Template

Challenge	How to Address
Requires extensive data collection for playbook effectiveness	Provide AI-driven research tools & market intelligence resources to efficiently collect & analyze critical data
Developing a customized playbook takes time	Offer pre-built templates & sector-specific case studies to accelerate the process, allowing SMEs to incrementally build their playbook
Limited flexibility for rapid market changes	Incorporate agile strategy frameworks & AI-driven forecasting tools to dynamically update the playbook based on real-time market changes
Success depends on execution & leadership commitment	Provide executive training, onboarding support, & accountability check-ins to ensure SMEs remain committed to their internationalization plan
Resistance to digital adoption in traditional SMEs	Offer step-by-step digital transformation training, AI-powered process automation tools, & real-world success stories to help SMEs transition smoothly

## 5. Executive Summary – Takeaways

- Act now to secure your SME's future. Every day of delay is a lost opportunity
- Threat of U.S. tariffs & annexation is real, but for Canadian SMEs the opportunity for international growth is even greater
- Delaying expansion increases your risk exposure to U.S. tariffs, supply chain disruptions, & competitive threats
- Canadian SMEs that act now gain first-mover advantage in international markets, securing profitable opportunities before competitors
- Government grants & trade incentives won't last forever. Early adopters will maximize financial support & minimize entry costs
- Expanding beyond North America is crucial for Canadian SMEs long-term growth & risk diversification

# Executive Summary – Your Next Steps

- Develop your playbooks using the provided template
- Identify high-potential CPTPP, CETA, & USMCA markets
- Analyze your AI, digital infrastructure, & supply chain readiness for international expansion
- Choose the best market entry mode - export, digital platforms, joint ventures
- Leverage automation, e-commerce, & digital trade tools to scale efficiently
- Apply for CanExport funding & leverage EDC financing to reduce risks
- Engage with the Trade Commissioner Service (TCS) for market entry guidance
- Establish local partnerships
- Join our community – Connect with other Canadian SMEs on the same journey to share best practices & support

# Up Our Game, Canada!

## Contact

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