**Why do international business - is it really worth the trouble?**

For starters – here’s a quick international trade quiz: from our 27 EU partners, take a guess at how many EU countries import more from the UK than we export to them? Read on to find out. Meanwhile, fear of the unknown and inertia are getting in the way of thinking about international markets for some businesses in Scotland and UK right now. Dismay takes hold when we see the EU negotiations press coverage, undermining confidence, sowing doubt. Clearly not a great feel if you are trying to get your business proposition out there, and win new customers.

There’s a bit of dithering about international growth plans. Reasons are plenty: Brexit dog’s breakfast, politics, legals, cultural differences, logistics. That’s not to mention the competition, limited resource and – just sometimes - a financiers’ prudence. The list goes on.

But here’s a thought: if you see your business lasting beyond the next 5 years (and let’s hope so) then it’s unlikely it will sustain growth if you only place your bets on home market customers. Oh no it won’t.

If ever there was a time to shake the e-dust off your business plan, it has to be now. Now, I **know** that business plans are not a seductive dossier for many business owners. More often seen as an evil necessity, cobbled together to win over investors or bank managers. I like to see it from a different angle. Your biz plan can be a fantastic story teller of you, what you do, why you do it, and where you see your future. It can be dynamic, not dusty, refreshing, not rusty, bright, not boring. And the bonus is, you can repurpose it to up your game for lots of other things you have to do to move your business on: budgets, website content, job specs, pitches and presentations. Best of all, a business plan gives you the words and the numbers you need to tell your story and promote your goods, your services, to new customers in new markets.

Beyond the statement of the blindingly obvious on doing business internationally, which is of course that new clients and suppliers will pop up because your market is so much bigger when you trade with the world, my top 3 reasons for getting out there are that you:

**1. De-risk through diversity**. Generating overseas sales helps spread your risk if your one major home market customer changes tack.

**2. Work better margins.** Working in sterling right now is an advantage, giving you an exporting head start.

**3. Compete less** with similar companies, not more. Your standout proposition will stand out even more in a larger diverse environment. Scottish provenance has for example worked brilliantly for a diverse range of businesses, from salmon to craft beer, to accountants and engineers.

Scotland sends £29bn, and the UK overall £51bn annually worth of goods and services out to the rest of the world each year. And yet - we still buy in much more than we sell. Look at the EU, our biggest trading market. Answer to the international trade quiz at top of this blog: only 4 countries out of 27 - Malta, Denmark, Sweden and Ireland - import more from the UK than we export to them. Room to do more? The answer has to be yes. That doesn’t even consider our vast market opportunities beyond EU, into Asia and the Americas.

In Scotland and UK, we want and need to trade with the rest of the world. This is not a glib and naïve view of the world by the way. Of course Brexit trade outcomes are important and we want them to continue to support our growth aspirations. But risk, margins and competition all fare better when you have an international business plan in place, whatever future trade rules throw at us.

So back to the idea of that dastardly business plan. Write the words. Do the numbers. Think big, with confidence and energy rather than fear and inertia. I’ll be right behind you.