

Border patrol: UK merchants expand overseas

More than 150 million consumers in the European Union shop online, according to a new report commissioned by communications agency The Blue Door. But only 20 percent of them, or 30 million, shop from sites based outside their native country. Since shoppers aren't crossing the virtual borders to come to their online shops, marketers are going to the shoppers, by launching country-specific websites.

Among the British marketers crossing the Channel is Buyagift.com. In July the experience-days retailer opened an office in Paris and a French website, Coolkado.fr. Buyagift is now "very much considering the opportunities to expand into other countries," said head of marketing Alison Wade, and will undertake market studies in Germany and Spain in the first quarter of the year.

Another home-grown catalogue expanding into Continental Europe is men's skincare brand Mankind. Launched in the UK in 2001, the £4.5 million business plans to unveil a site in Germany this year to "take advantage of the growth in the European market".

Of course, international expansion

is not limited to British companies. Swedish hardware store Clas Ohlson, which in its home country is nicknamed the "to-do shop"—a place that sells everything, helping customers tick off their to-do lists—opened its first UK store in November and plans to introduce a UK catalogue in the spring. The new London shop is part of "a long-term commitment to the UK," said president/CEO Klas Balkow. The £400 million company has more than 100 stores and circulates 4 million catalogues annually in Scandinavia.

US-based CSN Stores, which operates more than 200 websites, ranging from AllModernFurniture.com to Strollers.com, has crossed the Atlantic to open European headquarters in Ireland. The company launched CookwareEssentials.co.uk in the UK in time for the Christmas season. It will follow this launch with a lighting website in the first quarter of 2009, after which it will introduce furniture sites. CSN also plans to expand to other European countries, identifying Germany as a potential target. Founded in 2002, CSN has annual turnover of more than £135.4 million (\$202 million).

Other recent entrants to the UK market

Casual Male – US-based retailer/catalogue specialising in apparel for "big and tall" men

Cdiscount – France-based discount retailer

Kaboodle – the number-one social-shopping website in the US

Mouser Electronics – a US-based catalogue of electronic components

Overstock.com – Discounter based in the US

Brits abroad

Asos.com – appointed an international director in December to lead overseas expansion

Boden – entered Germany in 2007; US accounts for nearly one-third of total sales

Christopher Ward Watches – debuted a print catalogue in the US in October

Joules – began "a very small-scale test selling direct into the States" last spring

Long Tall Sally – began mailing catalogues into the US in September

Mothercare – unveiled its social shopping site Gurgle in the US and India in 2008

