WHEN I LIVED IN JAPAN IN 1993, I REGULARLY BEGGED MY Mom to ship sourdough pretzels from home. I can only imagine what I would have bought if I had had access to today’s Internet. The Web is a global channel. If you are a cybermerchant, sooner or later you’re going to want to tap the vast international potential of the Internet.

But the minute your merchandise crosses international borders—into the United States or other countries—you subject yourself and your business to a host of new liabilities, restrictions and regulations enforced by U.S. Customs or foreign governments. Here’s just a taste of the myriad issues you could face as you attempt to ship goods across borders: Fabrics may be subject to import restraints; food may need inspection; the duty rate may increase because of merchandise misclassification; or foreign currency fluctuations may lower profits. Any of these issues could, at the last minute, drive up costs and create unforeseen delays.

So how can you avoid such problems? My e-tip of the day. Before soliciting overseas customers, identify the permits or authorizations necessary to enter your goods either into the United States or foreign markets. If your shipment is large, you may want to contact a professional customs broker. For merchants exporting from the United States, the U.S. government normally has significantly less interest (with the exception of certain software and related items) in regulating items leaving the country. But it’s critical to check in advance on the customs administrations in the jurisdictions to which you are shipping.

You can also find good tips for going global by checking the guidelines adopted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in December 1999 (www.accc.gov.au/ecommm/CPGuidelines_final.pdf). Though nonbinding, these guidelines are a virtual “Going Global for Dummies” handbook. Most importantly, the guidelines suggest that, when developing your worldwide presence, you should put yourself in the position of your prospective customer and:

• Fully disclose key information in your advertising and marketing such as warranty details, contact information and delivery terms.
• Offer a safe method of payment, an easy way to confirm that a transaction has been completed, and a reasonable and affordable dispute resolution policy.
• Keep your site secure, maintain confidentiality and explain how you use personal information.

You may also want the Better Business Bureau online or a similar entity to independently review and certify your Web site.

Taking these steps can help you not only reassure overseas customers but also avoid attracting the attention of overseas regulators. You do not want to be the first e-business that a foreign government selects to demonstrate its new e-commerce enforcement policies.

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