

Success Story

Aligning Innovation with Global Sales

Alignment Simple Solutions



The Company

It's not hard to find Tess Winningham and Gary Gann—where else but the Birmingham track in Alabama? That's where Gary used to race in NASCAR in the late 1970s and early 1980s and still hangs out. It was there that he first saw demand for a quicker, easier way to diagnose wear and tear on tires and suspension, so he built a prototype system in his garage. Inspired, Tess soon quit her business development job to help him market the product, and presto—the husband-and-wife team formed Alignment Simple Solutions in 2011. They successfully tested the first prototype at the Charlotte Motor Speedway in North Carolina during the Chumpcar World Series of Racing.

“Our ‘QuickTrick’ compact portable wheel alignment diagnostic systems cost less than 10 percent of traditional fixed state-of-the-art equipment found in most maintenance shops, which run from \$10,000 to \$100,000,” says Tess, who serves as CEO. “Our system weighs only 15 pounds and eliminates the need for a lift, and almost anybody can use it by watching our 5-minute training video.”

“In many parts of the world, people are keeping their vehicles longer, and the roads are often rough and the weather uneven, which means gradual wear and tear on suspension and alignment,” she explains. “Hobbyist do-it-yourselfers are our largest market, as well as people who run maintenance and alignment shops. We're also selling to a lot of hot-rod enthusiasts.”

She also notes the company's product also allows for better preventive maintenance at 7,500 miles. Potential alignment problems can be diagnosed early on, saving an average of 184 sets of tires for every 20,000 vehicles.

The Challenge

Having established itself in the United States, the company made its first international sales in 2010, entering the Australian and Mexican markets via eBay. However, the Winninghams wanted to expand the company's international presence much further. One of their priorities was the European market, and they needed advice

on creating a website and locating a potential distributor in Germany.

The Solution

The U.S. Commercial Service in Birmingham, Alabama, heard about Alignment Simple Solutions through the Alabama Alliance—a collaboration of the local U.S. Commercial Service, State of Alabama Commerce Department, large city Chambers of Commerce through the state, and the Small Business Development Center.

U.S. Commercial Service Trade Specialist Nelda Segars and the Small Business Development Center provided export counseling and guidance on globalizing the company's website. Tess was also encouraged to join an Alabama Department of Commerce trade mission to Bremen, Germany. During the mission, she met several prospective distributors through prescreened meetings arranged by the U.S. Commercial Service at the U.S. Embassy, as well as introductions made by the Alabama Department of Commerce.

"As a result of this overall assistance and new resources and contacts, we developed an enhanced export strategy and within a few months had made sales to more than 30 countries," Tess reports. "We also established a foothold in Germany from where we made new sales to the United Kingdom, Finland, and Norway."

Tess says Europe is a particularly good market because they love cars and keep them forever, and that consumer spending tends to be tighter in Europe than the United States, which bodes well for the company's product because it's so inexpensive.

Alignment Simple Solutions now exports to more than 75 countries, including Panama, Costa Rica, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand, with exports accounting for about 10 percent of total sales.

Lessons Learned

"Without risk, there is no reward. The majority of buyers are outside of the United States. Take that leap of faith and establish relationships with folks early on to mitigate risk.

"Know the consumer market you are selling to, as it may be different than in the United States. For example, in the United States, our major market are males age 40–65 years who don't use a lot of social media. But in Japan, our target audience is much younger, and they use social media and enjoy modifying their cars.

"Consumers in many parts of Europe have high levels of disposable income, so there's lots of different opportunities for different industries. 'Made-in-the-USA' name brands sell well, even in Germany. The population of Europe is less homogeneous than in the United States, and people don't carry as much debt.

"Find out what overseas regulations might apply to your product. For example, since our product has electronics, the European Union regulations require that we have an end-user game plan for disposal at the end-of-product life cycle.

"Early on, talk with your local U.S. Commercial Service office and other contacts at the federal and state level.

"Take advantage of the many trade shows available through the U.S. Department of Commerce, including those in Germany. There's something for just about every business.

"Germany is an excellent springboard for making sales throughout the region, but before you sell to any country, go over there and talk to people.

"Get on board with trade missions and explore the possibility of grants; that's how I was able to participate in the trade mission to Germany."