
Global Partner Networks Come of Age

A network of country-based, independent business partners and experts is the best way to deliver the right product to the right customer, anywhere in the world. Just ask Persona International.

by Laura Daly

Companies that expect to compete globally must do many things differently. One of the most important is being able to adapt—really *adapt*—company products and services to the cultures in which they are being offered, not simply add another language to the instruction manual.

This can be a daunting challenge, particularly vis-à-vis training and enterprise transformation consulting. Imagine, for example, the demands on a company that is trying to rapidly launch a new product globally, against tight time constraints. To execute the launch flawlessly, the company wants its people throughout the world to be fully conversant in the product, understand its applications, and know how to properly present it to customers. Getting people up to speed quickly is tough, particularly when dealing cross-culturally. By the time the local culture cues get back to company marketing and production headquarters, time is lost and errors are introduced.

More businesses, however, are discovering a business model that can not only solve this problem, but leverage the tremendous opportunity presented by multicultural business relationships: the global partner network. Using this model, independent businesses operating in distinct markets are linked by a flexible framework of shared knowledge, values, and access. The enormous benefits—to network partners and customers alike—encompass far more than cultural adaptation, and are the reason why global partner networks have truly come of age.

Inside a Global Partner Network

The view from inside a global business network is excellent for both business partners and the umbrella organization.

When they join a well-designed network, most business partners have already attained long-standing customer relationships and respectable market share within their own countries. Since they share their customers' cultures, they can quickly adapt products and services that are accessible through the network. The partners receive an ongoing stream of globally tested solutions to their customers' needs. They win

big as profits rise, because their customers are delighted to receive effective, high-quality products and services that help them differentiate themselves from their competitors.

The umbrella organization also wins. Unencumbered by costly infrastructure and overhead, it uses its resources more wisely—to provide vision and leadership, make strategic decisions about product development, expand the network by adding new partners, feed the network with information, and infuse the team with an exhilarating sense of possibility. All of this builds long-term relationships and profitability.

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For reasons that range from cultural adaptability to cost effectiveness, the time is right for global partner networks. One of the most successful is Persona International, Inc.

The Persona Model

The scope and success of Persona International's global operation is unique in its industry. Not only does Persona provide some of the world's premier companies with an impressive array of strategic consulting and performance improvement solutions, but it dominates many markets in its niche in the extremely competitive world of international training. Persona's global partner network is at the core of its success.

The numbers are impressive: Persona has enjoyed sustained growth and profitability for almost two decades. This year, the company anticipates a 25% revenue increase offset by virtually no additional expenses. Its global network links partner organizations in 44 countries. The team boasts an evolving roster of the world's leading performance development authors.

Look deeper, and you'll also find a lot of satisfied customers. The company's client user list reads like a Fortune 1000 primer. Programs are highly respected for creating measurable improvement (in 1985, General Motors achieved an 11 to 1 improvement in ROI on its \$34



Persona President Jon Gornstein

million training investment), and have been computer-based for more than a decade. Every program is adapted to the culture and many are available in an astonishing 26 languages and several dialects.

All of this is coordinated by a handful of quietly competent headquarters staff based in a waterfront Victorian in Sausalito, California. There are no intense fluorescent lights or briefcase-toting vice presidents here, just the efficient hum of performance survey software and the multi-lingual murmur of staff busily serving business partners and customers.

So if bureaucracy isn't the key, how is such a successful global network built and managed? When Persona President Jon Gornstein tells the story, it sounds deceptively easy.

Choosing the Right Model

At age 54, Gornstein is an uncannily relaxed chief executive. Unbowed by jet lag from business trips that can range from China to Brazil over a two-week period, Gornstein still finds time to ski (this year, in the Andes and France) and runs several times a week. That discipline, combined with a strong entrepreneurial streak, caused him to discover the power of partner network models early.

"I'm originally from Chicago, but when I started Persona in 1980, I had spent ten years working in Denmark," Gornstein explains. "I had an idea that was quite advanced for the time—using the PC to profile people—and worked with a leading psychologist to create a profiling instrument. We conducted our first workshop in Europe and signed up four business partners on the spot. I suddenly saw the possibilities of working with the best experts to create truly innovative training programs and then deliver them through a network of independent partners."

Meanwhile, other training companies were building highly bureaucratic organizations. Gornstein explains, "Back then, most training companies didn't think about what it means to become global, and that's still a problem I see today. It's not enough to open an office in a country; you need to collaborate with people who embody what that country is all about, who work there, live there, understand the culture. That allows you to deliver the right products to the right people. Then, when you create a network of these collaborations, you can create value far greater than excellent cultural adaptation: you can share know-how and best practices on a global scale."

Even as a young entrepreneur, Gornstein knew that choosing the right business model was crucial. "The

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reason I chose the partner network model was twofold," he says. "First, it's very hard to be successful if you have high overhead. A partner network model avoids that. Second, nobody has an option on all the good ideas that work globally. A partner network gives you access to a wealth of global solutions that your partners have created and tested. Instead of inventing programs, you can spend your resources finding new business partners and independent developers that will funnel more value into the network. That's an important concept for companies that still insist on developing all their products internally."

Two additional factors drove Gornstein's early success. The first was a great idea. "To get a partner network organization started, you have to have a good product to push through the distribution system," he says. "The Danes say that you're entitled to one brilliant idea every ten years, and I guess I had mine when I came up with the idea of a personal profiling disk. Together with our *Persuasive Communicator* program, it's still one of our most successful business solutions."

The second was a clear vision. "Our mission from the beginning was to increase distribution, to maintain consistently high standards that were repeatable worldwide. I once made a list of comparisons between Persona and McDonald's. In many ways, what we're trying to do is the same: find the best product and then find a way to distribute it."

Networks Support Differentiation

That may sound simple, but in reality, Persona's partner network delivers many complex benefits that allow the company to differentiate itself in important ways, for example:

■ Cultural Adaptation

Because tailoring of Persona programs is done by local partners, programs that may originate anywhere in the world are not only quickly translated into the right language and dialect, but are also culturally adapted to work perfectly in each environment.

The value of local tailoring cannot be overstated. Gornstein explains, "If you're going to operate globally, the speed of getting things culturally adapted is critical. Over the years, we have created a system that is very close to 'just in time.' When we need to translate and culturalize a program into French, for example, our French partner will provide the translation and other cultural adaptation. This method allows us to go through one or two correction rounds instead of 50. That speeds up the culturalization process, gives our French partner control of the outcome, and still allows us to maintain program quality and consistency."

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■ Product Quality

Persona leverages its flexible structure to link some of the world's best performance development authors. Each new author relationship is carefully considered. Gornstein explains, "When we explore opportunities with authors, we ask three things: First, will the solution work internationally? Second, can it incorporate a software component? Third, is the curriculum designed to achieve measurable, bottom-line profitability improvement? We're looking for the essence of know-how, what the experts have been able to discover about people that makes business work better. If you've got the best idea and we're able to transfer it, that's what interests us."

■ Distribution Efficiency

The distribution efficiencies of a network structure are not only valuable to customers, they also offer a tremendous benefit for performance development authors. Even the best consultants can work with only a handful of clients at one time. But Persona's global network offers authors the ability to distribute their products, and earn royalties on their use, in 44 countries.

■ Speed

Persona's structure enables program development to be completed expeditiously. With experts on call, best practice research on the database, and hundreds of facilitators to pilot programs, a training solution can move from concept to implementation in six to eight months. "Because our network makes all of our shared expertise instantly accessible, we can create programs, including software, in a rapid turnaround time." says Gornstein. "That makes a tremendous difference to our customers, virtually all of whom need new ideas quickly but still need to keep costs under control."

■ Agility

"Nothing about Persona is static, just like nothing about business today is static. We're extremely flexible and agile, and that's one of the keys to our success. For example, we were recently able to establish new business partnerships in five South American countries within six months. These new partners bring a whole new dimension to our thinking. They add value to our network and ultimately our clients users." says Gornstein.

■ Seamless Service

Persona's ability to provide seamless service stems directly from its network structure. The global network shares common best practice databases and facilitates via constant electronic communication. Global businesses can assess, improve, and measure performance anywhere in the world. Interdisciplinary teams or work groups can receive consistent, coordinated training regardless of the miles that separate them. Smaller, local companies receive the same seamless service, plus the added benefit of global best practices that serve their unique performance improvement strategies.

Four Keys to Managing a Global Network

Gornstein points to four key practices for managing and motivating a global business partner network:

1. Feed the Network

"The thing about a partner network is that you have to feed it. One way we do that is by launching new products at International conferences. We've held conferences in places like Paris, Vienna, and Phuket. Network partners who attend the conferences get the chance to hear directly from the program author. They receive a turnkey program. During the conference, they already begin to culturally adapt materials. And our partners really enjoy the conferences. It's like a 'field of dreams': when you announce an international conference, they will come!"

2. Share the Same Values

"For those of us at headquarters, our primary customers are our partners. That's the way we're structured: to support our partners' success. We have recruited staff at our headquarters from a variety of countries and cultures for that reason. Our partners, in turn, support each other. We make sure that everyone in the Persona network shares that philosophy, because that's what will contribute to everyone's success."

3. Develop Consistent Standards

"You must set standards and adhere to them consistently. For example, we do only about 15 things. That's a conscious decision. But we believe that we do those things better than anyone in the world. One reason we can is that we have specific standards for program development, for adding new network partners, for making system-wide software adjustments, for everything that touches the network. It's part of our value system. Everyone in the network relies on our ability to adhere to consistent management practices."

4. Think Globally

"If you're going to be global, you have to *think* globally. For example, I don't just get phone calls and e-mails about Persona business in a particular country; I get information about how the local people are feeling at a personal level, their problems, their expectations. The point is that you must be tuned in to the world. You must consider the world to be your community if you're really going to be a leader in the global marketplace."

The Bottom Line

"We're not in the paper-and-pencil business," says Gornstein. "We're in the business of transferring know-how. As such, we encourage our network partners to control 99% of the process. They have the potential of earning as much as 11 to 1 on their partnership investment."

As that know-how flows through the system, the Persona network continues to replicate itself. The company's client base also continues to broaden and deepen in a way that would not have been possible had Persona relied on centrally owned satellite offices positioned in a few countries.

"Our structure is a major factor in our ability to help companies around the globe improve performance in truly dramatic ways," says Gornstein. "Our programs are used by hundreds of employees at a time. Each customer receives the added value of the best practices from all that have gone before. We deliver the best ideas first, in most parts of the world. None of that would happen without our partner network."

"The network also supports our philosophy, our growing expertise, and our team camaraderie. Because of the network, the value that we can deliver to customers continues to grow exponentially. And when all is said and done, our results define our success."

Laura Daly is a California-based marketing copywriter who specializes in corporate performance practices.



About Persona International, Inc.

The Persona International network offers an extensive array of consulting solutions and customizable programs in the areas of enterprise transformation, change implementation, cultural and customer assessment, leadership, strategic thinking, management, and communication. Programs are culturally adapted, available in up to 26 languages, and complemented by computer-based measurement systems.

"Until recently, much of the focus of business leaders has been on managing the performance of business drivers on the process side," explains Persona President Jon Gornstein. "We find that many executives want to do things differently, but don't bother to align their employees' values with those of the company. That's especially true for companies in trouble. They try to rearrange things without understanding that they have to modify their people's behavior. That's like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic while the ship is sinking."

"Our focus is on the values, practices, and behavior of people. We help companies assess how they're doing, define what values are important for success, and adjust the company's culture to fit the new strategy so that the outcome is competitive excellence based on the alignment of individuals, the organization, and customers."

To find out more, contact Persona at:

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