
New initiative to promote "customer-led" approach to international trade

"Understand your customer" is arguably the most important rule in business.

And because it's a rule that doesn't stop at the water's edge, the Hull & Humber Chamber of Commerce is launching a project to help companies take a customer-led - as opposed to a product-led - approach to international trade.

The Chamber, which is part of the new World Trade Centre in Hull, has formed a partnership with Language is Everything, an interpreting and translation company based in Howden. The organisations will be working together to help business people develop new ideas for understanding their overseas customers.

"There are over 200 languages spoken in Europe, and more than 2,000 in Asia," says Pauline Wade, the head of the Chamber's International Trade Centre. "We're going to be delivering a range of services - from seminars to working with clients one-on-one - to promote the importance of interpreting, translation and cultural awareness."

The focus of activity will be the new World Trade Centre Hull & Humber. Officially opened in September by Peter Mandelson, the European Union's trade commissioner, the WTC provides access to markets, partners and investors through specialist expertise, networks, support services and facilities.

"We have two key messages," says Carolyn Burgess, the chief executive of Language is Everything. "On the one hand, every country, every region and every town or city presents its own special challenge. Cultural differences can play havoc with what people think is their intuitive understanding of customers and markets.

"On the other hand, the fundamentals of doing business never change: if you try to make it easy for your customers in Beverley or Birmingham to simply pick up the phone and talk to someone, you should do the same for your customers in Budapest or Beijing. In general terms, if you're customer-led in the UK, you shouldn't become product-led when you go overseas."