



CAMELS, COFFEE, TEQUILA & TEAK

Conor Woodman shares some of the insight he gained from his adventure, as featured in Channel 4's 'Around the World in 80 Trades'

For the last nine years, I worked in the financial sector, most recently as an Analyst in Corporate Development for Ernst and Young. Last year, I challenged myself to travel round the world and try to make money by buying and selling everything from camels to coffee and tequila to teak. In 2008, I sold my flat, took £25,000 of the profit and bought a one-way flight to Khartoum. Five months later I'd made \$50,000 profit, covered 36,000 miles across Africa, Asia and The Americas and was heading back to London having learnt a thing or two about sales and negotiation around the world. I'd like to share some of the insight I gained from my adventure, 'Around the World in 80 Trades'.

1. Information has value.

While in South Africa, I found a supplier of fiercely hot chilli sauce and

discovered (unsurprisingly) that he wasn't doing much business in India – "ice to Eskimos?" I hear you cry. So I put a proposal to him: if he gave me a good price then I'd buy 4000 bottles of his sauce and ship them to Delhi. Once I'd found a customer there, I planned to put him directly in touch with them, so he could make the most of any repeat business. I was offering him a low risk opportunity to crack a new and potentially massive market. He sold me the bottles at cost – \$1.90 including shipping and taxes, and the whole lot landed in Delhi a few days later.

I decided to kick off by cold calling a few of the bigger retailers. The challenge was to convince them that my sauce was hot enough to satisfy Delhi's desire for particularly fiery food. The first retailer I met did a taste test – a crisp rather bravely lashed with a generous dollop of Hot az Hell. After I'd thrown half a dozen buckets of water over him,

he cooled down enough to assure me, "Oh my God. That is HOT!" and promptly ordered a dozen boxes.

With a few orders from prominent retailers in the bag, I was in a position to approach a distributor. I'd done much of the hard work for him already, securing repeat orders at a price that meant he could make a tidy margin. With the added promise that he could deal directly with my supplier in South Africa, he took the lot off my hands for \$2.25 per bottle – \$1,500 profit.

"After I'd thrown half a dozen buckets of water over him, he cooled down enough to assure me, "Oh my God. That is HOT!" and promptly ordered a dozen boxes."



2. Silence is golden.

Negotiating my way round the world often took on very different dimensions. In North Africa buying carpets involved sitting around drinking endless cups of mint tea, and the opening price for negotiation usually started at around 10 times the final selling price.

When I was in Morocco, I decided to buy a 40-year-old Berber carpet directly from the home of a Berber family high in the Atlas mountains, with the intention of selling it in Marrakech. I decided that €400 was my walkout point. I simply couldn't make a decent profit if I paid more than that. So I wanted to start my negotiation at €200. There's great mileage in giving someone the silent treatment in negotiation. The Berber man's opening offer for the rug was €600; I knew if I started at that price it'd be too difficult to get him down to my limit, so I said nothing. I simply asked him to come up with a better price. This was distinctly not the Berber way and he was unsettled. Despite his repeated requests for my opening price I stayed firm – I'd give him a price once he'd lowered his asking price to something more sensible. Eventually he cracked and dropped to €450 – a 25% reduction, without me giving anything away.

3. You can lead a horse to market but...

Horse traders have a fierce reputation, and rightly so. In Kyrgyzstan I rode up into the hills and bought horses from a shepherd. In the Uzghen horse market four days later, I was locked in a firm handshake by a man whose hand was twice the size of my own, and a huge crowd of horse traders had gathered round so close that I could feel the breath of at least five other men on my skin.

The man was determined that the horse I was selling had a bad leg. Now, not being a horseman, I had no idea whether this was true. I suggested that the horse was just a little stiff after a long drive across country. I knew I was. But this was to no avail. I didn't know my product as well as my potential buyer did and so I was (literally) being punished for it. A painful lesson in more ways than one.

4. Talk to the boss.

In Sudan's Dongola camel market, I spent several hours negotiating with a man over the price of some camels. We went toe to toe, shouting theatrically, throwing our hands in the air and even staging dramatic walkouts to force each other to alter our prices. As we eventually neared a final settlement, the real owner of the camels appeared, berated his employee severely for messing around and told me in no uncertain terms that his camels were not for sale.

5. Don't take my word for it...

While I was in China I saw a product that impressed me – an inflatable boogie board. When your holiday was over you simply deflated it and chucked it in your suitcase. I decided to buy 750 of them and shipped them over the Pacific to Mexico in time for the summer holidays. The challenge was how to convince the Mexican market it was a good product, so I had the idea of getting them endorsed by a surf champion.

Angel Salinas, better known as 'The Masked Surfer', was curious as to what an inflatable surfboard was, so he'd agreed to try it out on Mexico's largest and scariest wave – the Zicatella Pipeline. Now when you ask a champion pro surfer to test your product on one of the world's largest shorebreaks, you don't actually have to go with them. But I did anyway. While I was pummeled by several tonnes of fast-moving water until eventually being washed back onto the beach, vomiting into the sand, Angel fared a little better and was impressed. "Not for professional surfers," he informed me, "but perfect for the kids."

A week later in Acapulco, I met the VP of Mexico's biggest sports retail chain, Marti Group, and taking care not to mention my recent near-drowning, I relayed what Angel had said. Not only did I have a good product, but crucially I could use the endorsement to talk up the quality and convince him to take all 750 boards, making myself a tidy \$7,000 profit into the bargain.

A final thought from Huthwaite

What Conor accomplished showed impressive and innovative commercial flair, and we applaud his achievements. In reality, few people possess this level of natural entrepreneurial talent, and instead need to spend time planning the sales call or negotiation effectively, by using a clear strategy based on best practice.

As Conor discovered, it's important to understand the impact of cultural differences, and to plan for them. This will not only prepare you for varied experiences, it will also allow you to manage the climate of the negotiation and the relationship. Equally, it's essential to realise the true value of your product/service to the customer, and to identify the right customer and market in the first place. Once you've done this, effective selling and negotiation skills come into play and can make the difference between success and failure. At Huthwaite, we have behaviour models in place that will help you and your team develop these skill sets. So whether you're selling camels or computer systems, we can help improve the sales performance of your business.

"Last year, I challenged myself to travel round the world and try to make money by buying and selling everything from camels to coffee and tequila to teak."

