

Order2Cash



Pauline Dirkmaat,
EVP - Order2Cash

Industry: Computer Software

Mission statement: "Our solutions and services offer support across the entire order to cash cycle; from prospect analysis and assessment through to invoicing, payments and collections."

Headquarters: Amsterdam - Duivendrecht, Noord Holland

Founded: 2016

Pauline Dirkmaat is Executive Vice President of Order2Cash, a Dutch FinTech company that helps businesses transform their Order to Cash processes and improve their Accounts Receivable performance. She is responsible for managing and developing the company's U.S. operations. About 15 years ago she moved to Soho in Manhattan to set up the U.S. branch of Dutch software company, Tridion (now part of SDL Tridion). Since then she's held a similar role to her current position with another Dutch software company, ZYLab.

After seeing the city evolve through the lens of three different companies, she has amassed a wealth of knowledge on the ins and outs of expanding and scaling a Dutch business from scratch in the big apple. We caught up with her to gain insights on everything from setting up your business for success to landing large deals with a small team.

Key takeaways:

- Start by coming up with a solid business plan
- Create thought leadership content with clients active in the U.S.
- Use smart partnering to accelerate growth
- Don't copy your Dutch sales approach
- Have a dedicated support team in place

Have a solid business plan in place

Before starting your U.S. operation, it's important to come up with a solid business plan that's suitable for the new region. It's always a shock to me when companies try to act without this. It's unfortunately very common to send one or two people to the U.S. and use the same objectives and targets as the Dutch market. You simply can't copy/paste what's worked elsewhere. I believe, it's crucial to understand the market scope, the competitive landscape, your ideal customer/partner profile etc. What are the needs/requirements of potential customers and do they match your company's strengths and offering? If you see a gap, you can think of filling it with product innovation, smart marketing or teaming up with partners.

It's also important to know what success means for your organization and to set some clear timelines and measurable goals. It's a good idea to build in some flexibility, especially in the first year.

Of course you also need to have your necessary paperwork in place, not only to start the company, but also to execute your operations. This means all U.S.-required contracts, tax registrations, support models, escalation processes and HR processes need to be in place. Even when you have strong finance/HR/legal departments in the Netherlands, teaming up with local tax, legal and recruitment experts will save you from errors and uncertainties.

Once your paperwork is approved and you have an office in place, the fun and obviously hard part is to hire the right team.

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Making a name for yourself in the U.S.

I think a common misunderstanding is that some Dutch organizations think that, since it's a larger market, expanding to the U.S. will immediately translate into more opportunities. They expect that deals will come in faster but the reality is, no matter how established your name/brand may be in Europe, that may not be the case here. Raising awareness will be one of your first and most crucial priorities.

Once the target audience finally knows your name, then you're still 'that European company'. This can be a little bit uncomfortable for some prospects so you have to prove your reliability and ability to act and become a trusted partner that can handle all their problems and provide local implementation services and local support.

If you want your company to succeed, then my one piece of advice would be to make sure you focus on showing clients/prospects how you are creating a permanent base here in the U.S. Your ability to expand and solidify your operations will help to reassure your audience that you're in for the long-haul. If you have a large and respected client base, even if these clients are European, use them as references wherever possible.

Thought Leadership and account based marketing

We have always tried to establish a Thought Leadership position within a particular segment of the marketplace in the first 2 years. I find that partnering with an existing client, an industry analyst or consulting firm can provide quick and fruitful access to your intended audience. Jointly published stories, seminars or speaking opportunities provide great media opportunities.

It's also important that you use the advantages of account based marketing. Ask your European clients to help you grow in the U.S. For example, if you work with a large tech firm in Europe, you can easily upsell the account and find opportunities within their U.S. based divisions. Existing clients can also be great references. Giving them a platform to speak directly to your audience through case presentations or sessions can really help to solidify your position within a market.

Partner up to get the accelerator effect

An effective way to accelerate sales is to focus on smart partnering. Partners that can sell your services or can include your services/products in their offering can be key relationships for growth. The U.S. is full of 'Value Added Resellers', many of which don't add any value, so please be critical and selective.

Once you find the right partner, make sure that you have a solid supporting model in place to train, support and promote the partnership so that both parties can benefit from the relationship. Successful partnerships require continued investment in time and resources but they provide spectacular benefits when managed correctly.

Invest in one really great event or campaign

As a start-up, my advice is to focus your resources to drive the biggest return on investment. Instead of spreading your budget over many different activities, I would rather do one or two events or marketing campaigns really well. Focus and quality is important, both for you and your audience.

Don't copy your Dutch sales approach one for one

Besides the cultural differences, the needs and requirements in the U.S. might also differ from Europe. Even subtle wording can impact your desired marketing message. If you know people in the U.S., ask them to give you feedback on your marketing materials and try to come up with a U.S. version.

Don't be shocked if your U.S. clients want A,B or C that impacts the roadmap of the product. It doesn't mean that you have to offer this immediately, but be prepared. Hopefully this already became clear in your market research. It's not always the case that U.S. prospects want exactly the same product as European prospects. As stated before, small modifications in your offering might be needed.

Put a face to the name

In the beginning, I would not be too afraid to invest in travel costs. A lot of professionals do online demos and presentations but, ultimately, you buy from people. If you're willing to go to a prospect's office and meet them in person, you will be able to demonstrate your commitment and show them the customer service they're looking for. This helps to build trust and close an opportunity faster.

Send someone with direct access to the C-level to start the business

The employee that starts the U.S. operation should know all necessary HQ resources that are needed to close an enterprise deal or to escalate an event. It's also important that this person has a direct line with the top level so they can make quick decisions. If the CEO sees the U.S. effort as strategic, then it's likely that you'll get support from all departments within the company.

It's important that the success of the U.S. operation is seen as a priority. If it's just seen as a fun expansion project, it's probably not going to be successful. And the reason why I'm saying that is, in the beginning, you'll need all hands on deck. If you have a small team in the U.S., but you want to bring in a global enterprise, you need to work hand in hand with Headquarters because this global company will most likely expect to interact with multiple professionals from different departments within your organization. It's about showing your strength, your capabilities and your professionalism. Act like the company you want customers to see.

Have a support team in NL ready to work U.S. hours

When you start a U.S. operation and your goal is to grow fast, you have to make sure a team of resources is lined up to either go to the U.S. or at least support the U.S. team. That's not always easy due to the 6-9 hours time difference, i.e. not every employee in Holland wants to do demos at 10pm or work on the weekends. So it's important that some employees at HQ are extra flexible when it comes to supporting the U.S. team and their customers when needed, especially in the initial phase.

To reassure clients that you have a strong organization providing support to the (new) U.S. operation, introduce multiple professionals in the sales cycle. By including the head of U.S. operations, a salesperson, a technical domain expert or other relevant functions, your small U.S. operation will appear larger, more professional and able to deliver the same quality as your large competitors.

Don't just send your best sales reps

If you send people from the Netherlands, select employees that have a certain eagerness to win. They need to have entrepreneurial skills. This is not, per se, just your best sales rep. It has to be somebody who's able to live in a country (without any contact in the beginning), to work crazy hours and get 'no' for an answer many times but still want to continue. Someone who is able to think outside the box and can come with new ideas. Of course, if they have some familiarity with the culture, the language and the ways of doing business, all the better.

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Hire a complimentary team

When hiring, I would always advise you to develop a complimentary team that makes each other stronger. For example, four team members with complementary skills can most likely do more than four sales reps and your organization becomes less dependent on HQ resources.

Be aware of cultural differences

I have noticed, working with an American team, that the Dutch can come across as being too direct. This can make your prospects (and staff) feel uncomfortable. In the U.S., employees have an 'at will' contract, which means they may be hesitant to contradict their manager for fear of negative consequences.

It is important to be able to read subtle signs and explain the cultural differences but, more importantly, to focus on creating a safe working environment where everybody's opinion matters. Building trust and empathy are vital in building a successful team.

My experience is that the Dutch have all the skills and work ethic needed to compete and excel in the U.S. marketplace. With the right preparation, execution plan and team, the Dutch are a dangerous Orange Machine :).