

Go Big Go International

The SEA Cross Border Ecommerce Playbook

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Selling into Southeast Asia the right way

Right on your doorstep is one of the world's busiest, youngest, and most affluent digital economies: South East Asia, home to over **400 million internet users**, with an ecommerce market estimated at **over USD \$120 billion**, and the world's **fifth largest economy**.

- > Correct expansion into this market could make your products available to hundreds of millions of new potential buyers.
- > Cross border sales can be complex and challenging, with some of the world's largest and best-known multinational companies failing spectacularly when expanding abroad.
- > We've consulted with Shopify Plus Partner, Kah Hing from Meekco, to create this playbook to help you succeed, where others have failed.

The Southeast Asia Cross border Ecommerce PlayBook, is your step-by-step framework for success in ecommerce in the region. Whether you're just considering cross border expansion, or looking to scale your established international operations faster, this comprehensive playbook can help to reduce your risk.

Co-Author and Shopify Plus Partner: Kah Hing, Meekco.Asia

Serial entrepreneur, digital brand advisor, and cross border expert Kah Hing is the CEO of Meekco.Asia, an award-winning full-stack conversion marketing company.

Kah Hing set up an online commercial alarm system store in Malaysia in 2015, and was a pioneer in scaling B2B engineering products sales online, when most competitors relied on trade shows, referrals, and cold calls for leads.

Key to the successful business expansion was Kah Hing's use of the Shopify platform to boost traffic and generate leads, and in 2016, he established Meekco, a digital marketing company which applied Shopify to assist traditional businesses in Malaysia to digitise their product offering.

Meekco began with its own online store, applying marketing automation, backend development, app integration, and learning how to best position products, pricing, and margin.

Qualifying as a Shopify Partner, Meekco agency began to organise community meetups, bringing together a diverse group of entrepreneurs across Malaysia, from small merchants to large brands, app developers, and marketing agencies.

Meekco ran free workshops and training sessions, to help grow Shopify adoption in Asia.

The agency began helping Malaysian companies to establish local currency checkout, payment gateways, and overcoming the major barriers to entry to the global online market.

The company's recent success includes winning 2021 Asia ecommerce Awards in four categories, including Best in ecommerce (Brands), Best ecommerce Consultant, and Best ecommerce Solution.

MEEKCO.
ASIA



Phase one:

MAKE IT LOCAL

Part one:

Localise the customer experience

Your website is your storefront—and when you’re opening your doors to shoppers in another country, it’s imperative to design a great user experience for your customers; that begins with understanding your target users in each country—and how they behave online.

1.1 Identify local trends and online behaviours

Information-gathering is your starting point. Explore high-traffic competitor merchant websites in the target country, and examine design and utility of these sites.

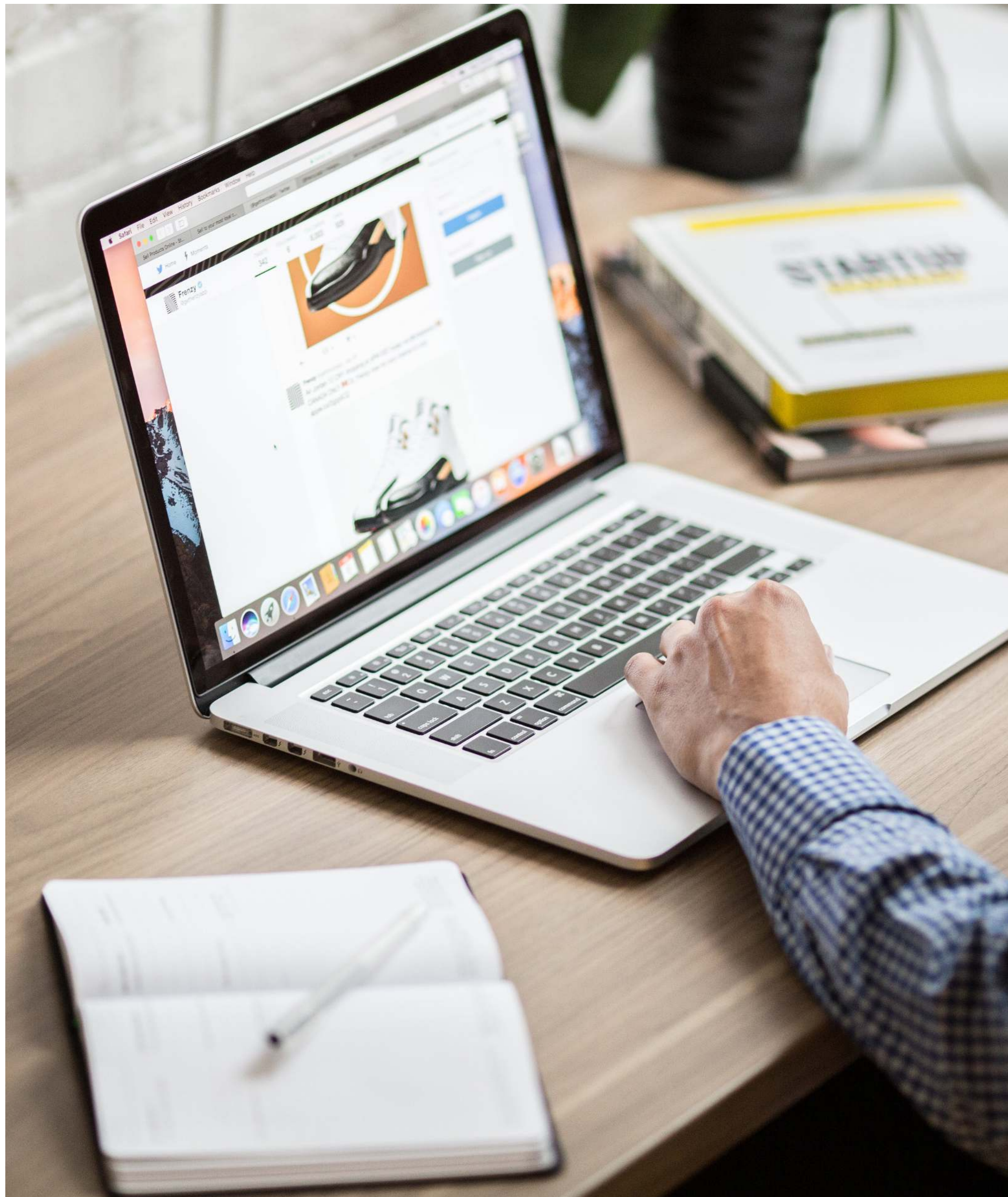
- > Is there a pattern to the way products are displayed on each site, indicating a local trend?
- > Where are functions like the search bar, menu, and checkout typically placed?
- > Go through the checkout process in a few stores to see the most common payment options.

You can also get a good feel for which are the most popular products with local shoppers, by exploring the high-traffic areas of ‘marketplace’ sites that serve your target region or country. Around 60% of all global online sales take place on marketplaces.

The world’s biggest marketplaces are eBay, Amazon, and Alibaba, but most countries in Southeast Asia have several popular local marketplaces (see list). These sites show the most popular goods, payment methods, and shipping options that local customers will be familiar with.

Leading online marketplaces in Southeast Asia

Brunei	Babakimpo
Cambodia	Tinh Tinh E-Commerce
Indonesia	Tokopedia / Shopee
Laos	Lazada
Malaysia	Shopee
Myanmar	Shop.com.mm / Lazada
Philippines	Lazada / Shopee
Singapore	Lazada / Shopee
Thailand	Shopee / Lazada
Vietnam	Tiki / Lazada / Shopee



Meekco's vision: To provide a one-stop solution shop for retailers to sell cross border into SEA.

Meekco's cross border service:
Customising the user interface and user experience to target markets

There are a number of components to this customisation:

1. Localise store messaging

Banners remind customers they are now shopping in the global store, offer a choice of currency to shop, and warn that checkout amount will be calculated in MYR (for example).

2. Collect local customer's data and give voucher

Pop-up windows offer to email a discount voucher to customers who sign up for the newsletter and provide their email and birthdate.

3. Content translation

Customer's currency selection triggers a site change so that content appears in the appropriate language. EG selecting IDR will see words in Indonesian for site menu options.

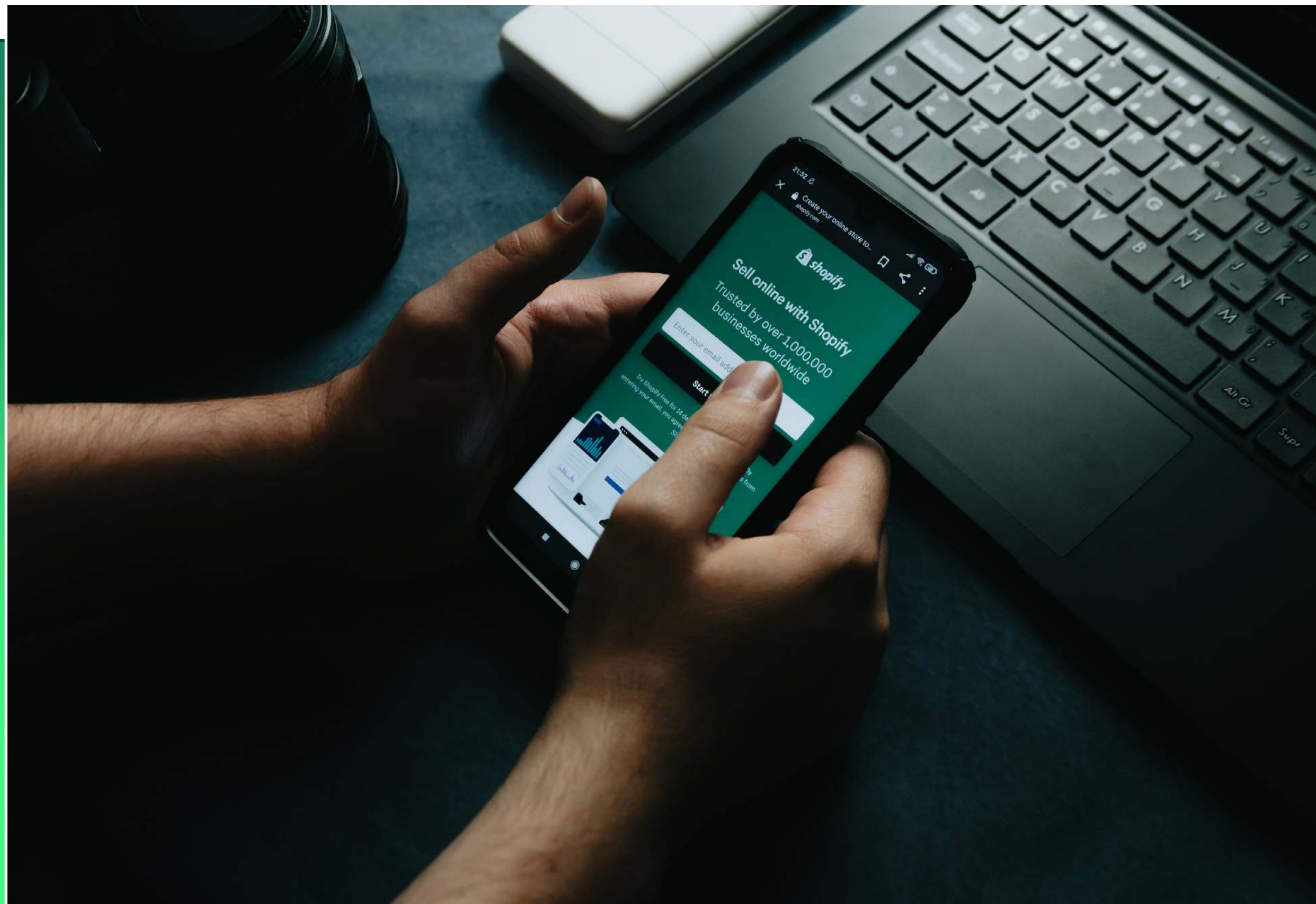
4. Store translation

Important shopping keywords, including 'sale price,' 'collection return', and 'regular price' are translated across the site.

5. Country stores selectors

Customers can choose from a menu of common shipping locations via a pop-up as they enter the store (EG Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, or Rest of World), and their choice is stored for their next visit.

You may consider testing your entry into a new region by selling your products through a marketplace. This can reduce your risk because the investment is low; however, it comes with many downsides. Your margin is cut significantly, and enterprises selling on marketplaces lose valuable customer behaviour data they would glean from their own branded site. **Marketplaces can condition shoppers not to purchase from branded local sites, and marketplace sales can also cannibalise sales on your branded store.**



1.2 Localise your site structure

When marketing your products into another country, think ahead and organise your URL structure for multiple stores in a way that optimises them for search engines. You can use either a country-specific domain (example.com.sg, example.co.id) or a subdomain (sg.example.com, id.example.com) strategy.

Offer a local customer experience by directing visitors to the right store. One option is to have your site automatically geo-target customers, redirecting them to the relevant store by detecting their browser language or IP address. Alternatively, allow customers to choose their store via a pop-up or landing page—use the Shopify app or engage your development partner to build a custom technology solution.

1.3 Establish user trust

Even experienced shoppers can be wary of online stores, as the internet is full of scams. Your site delivers a far better customer experience when you've established consumer trust. Partner with reputable external sources to assure customers your store is legitimate.

When launching your site, get in touch with local media, either via a PR agency, advertising, or media release, asking for coverage. Ensure you link anything they publish on your web page. Once you have established connections with local partners, such as fulfillment centres or couriers, always include them on your web page.

Another legitimate way to build trust is via external shopper reviews—but make sure you use a reliable review site that is used by real shoppers, and not filled with fake reviews.

Unboxing video reviews are another popular way for consumers to assess products. Select a local reviewer with a good audience on a site such as YouTube or Instagram, and offer to provide them with one of your products for their review. You can then post the link on your website.

1.4 Establish platform features and scalability

Building the foundation of your online business with future expansion in mind means you can avoid getting caught short if your business takes off.

Begin with the end in mind. Think about the volume of orders you might have in one to two years if your marketing is successful. Then make sure that every component of your operation can handle 10, 100, or 1,000 orders a day—whatever you set as your goal, double it.

You should consider how your current operation could handle these orders:

- > How will your logistics tools and partners handle the extra volume?
- > Can you give customers enough support, how will you scale this service?

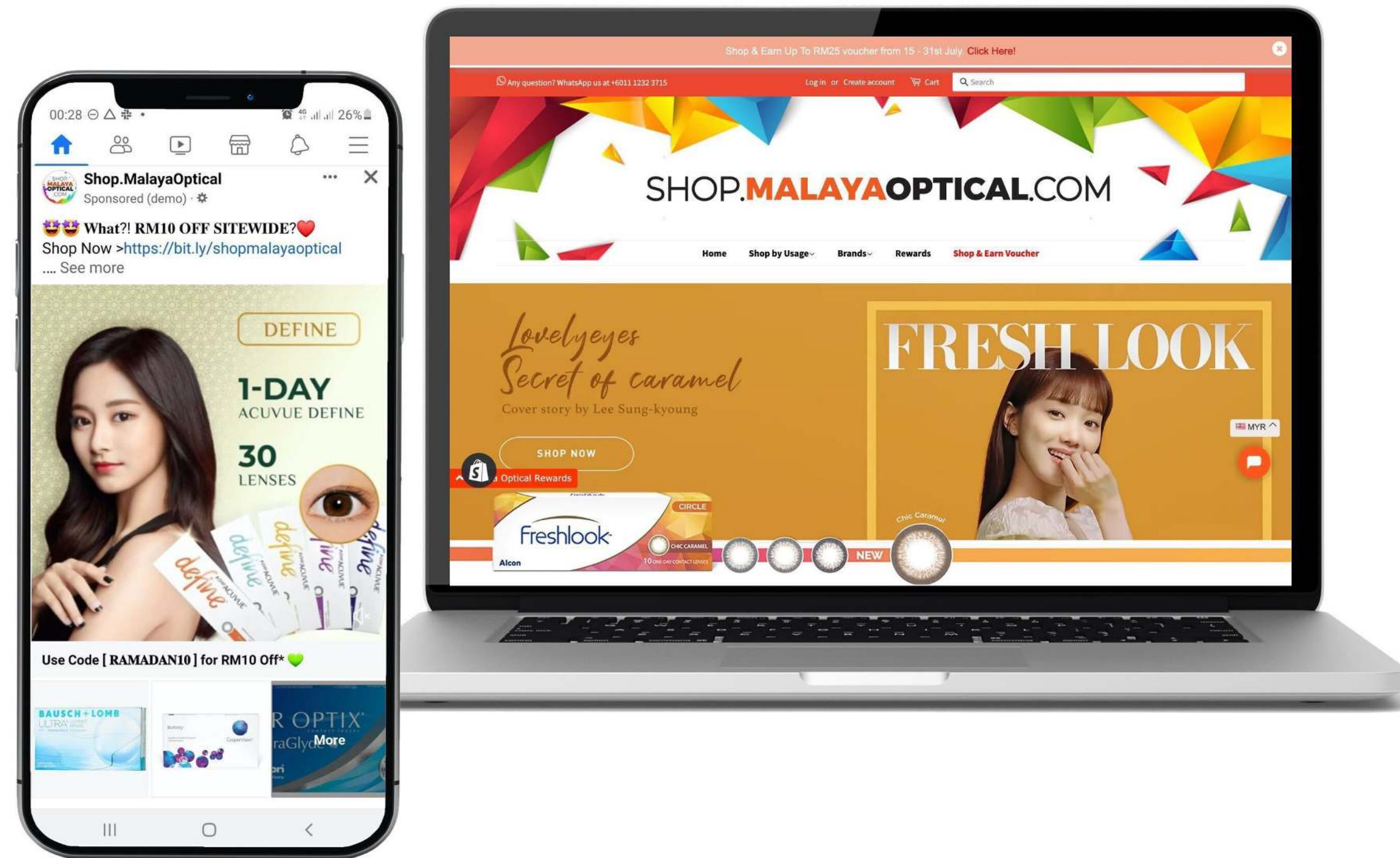
Make sure that your platform provides the features that you want to offer future customers. Can it handle multiple currencies, and different languages, for example? Ideally your chosen platform will allow you to replicate the successful features in one country, and ‘clone’ or transfer these successful models to use in a site dedicated to a different country (Shopify Plus offers these features).

User experience and shopping behaviours will change over time, so base your enterprise on a platform with continuous improvement and innovation—for example, merchants that offer a credit-card checkout can then quickly update to new payment methods like e-wallet.

Kah Hing from Meekco says:

“The Shopify regional team has helped me understand some of the differences that apply between various countries in South East Asia, and has connected me with local experts for advice. They have helped me to gain information and insights before launching into a new country.”

Work with the Shopify regional team and a qualified local UI/UX expert to optimise your cross border site development. Shopify Plus helps merchants create personalised experiences for customers—no matter where they are engaging with your brand.



Malaya Optical

“With Meekco covering the online store global expansion in content localisation and store conversion marketing services, our Malaya Optical Shopify Plus store sales have grown 50% in the last two months post-pandemic. Besides, they also replicated our online eyewear business success into Singapore, Philippines, and Middle East with Shopify expansion stores.”

Ryan Ho

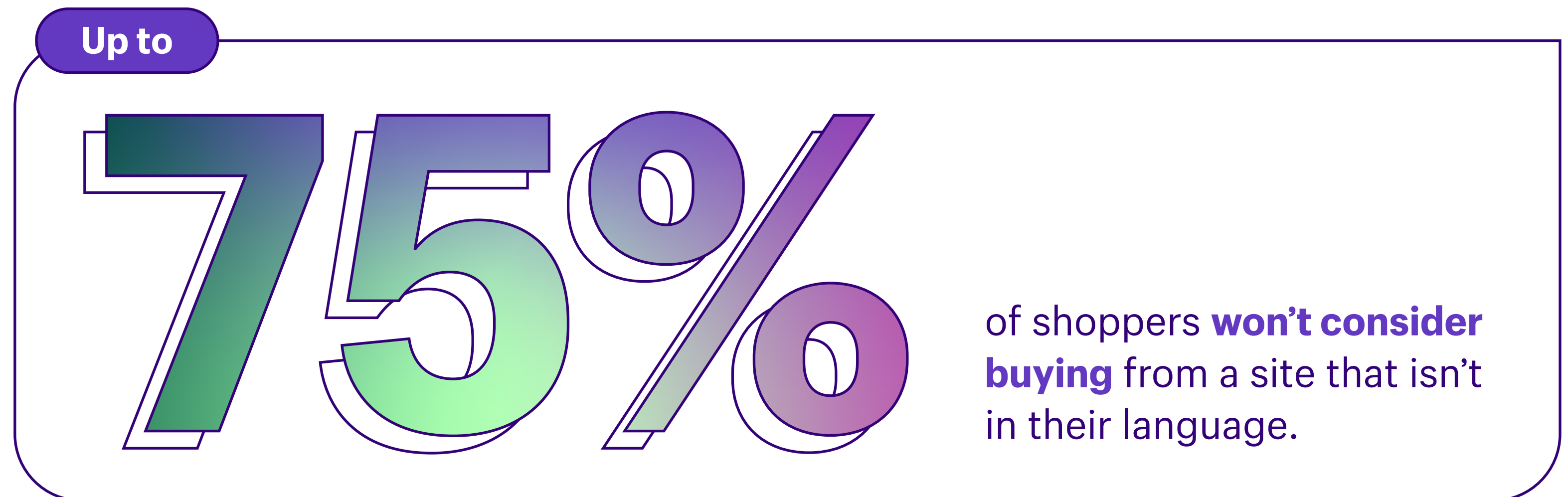
CEO, Malaya Optical

Part two:

Localising your social media and marketing campaigns

If you want to successfully launch your business into a new country, your marketing can't simply be drag-and-drop from your country of origin; localise your campaigns to reach your new market.

It's important to localise nearly every facet of your site, including language translations.

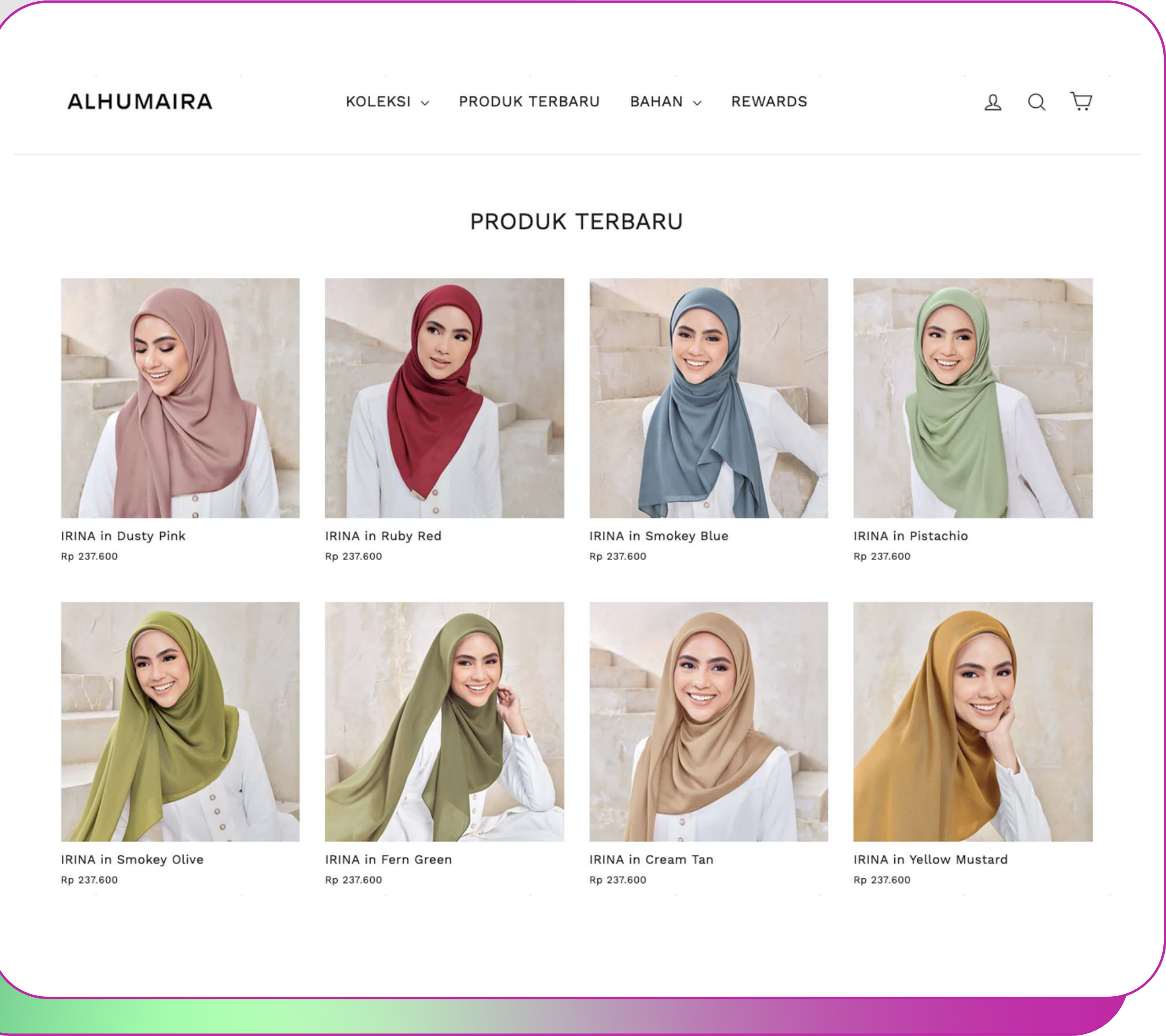


2.1 Write local content for your site

Consumers will respond to subtle differences in language and style that are familiar to them. The best way to make sure that your customers are comfortable on your site is to engage local writers who are familiar with the local voice, and can re-purpose your existing content so that it speaks to your new audience. Look for local marketing agencies, make connections on LinkedIn, or check out your competitors' sites to see what content does well.

2.2 Show local faces

Use imagery that reflects the local race or culture; remember, your site will appeal more to local audiences if they see themselves reflected in the faces on your website and marketing. Consider hosting 'real life' video ads on your website featuring a local person, discussing your product features in the local language.



Alhumaira Worldwide

“By partnering with Meekco, we were able to overcome the cross border ecommerce challenges, such as UI/UX for the local, logistic, and payment method limitations. We can now provide a fully localised shopping experience to our shoppers in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and the States.”

Ms Aini Shahida

Ecommerce Manager, Alhumaira Worldwide

2.3 Speak local slang in your socials

Social media can be tough for outsiders entering a new market. Gain an understanding of the types of content that appeals in your target country by studying the accounts of social media influencers and competitor brands where you are launching your product. Find people who may have some connection with your industry and have a strong local following—for example, if you're selling headphones, you might choose someone connected to the music industry. You may be able to engage them in your campaign, otherwise, look for a social media agency that is making headway with your audience. Stick with reputable agencies that are certified as partners by large social media companies because these require stringent qualification procedures. EG a Meta partner, if you're running Facebook ads, or a Shopify partner.

Language chart

Indonesia	▶	Indonesia, English
Vietnam	▶	Vietnamese
Thailand	▶	Thai
Singapore	▶	English, Chinese
Malaysia	▶	English, Chinese, Malays
The Philippines	▶	Tagalog, English
Brunei	▶	English, Malay

2.4 Understand local seasons

Public holidays and retail-focused events can vary widely between different countries. In Thailand, pre-Songkran 'splash sales' can be popular online in early April, just before locals celebrate Songkran (New Year), where family and friends traditionally splash each other with water in blessing. While for Indonesian customers, traditional gift-giving to celebrate the end of Ramadan can trigger big online sales.

Not forgetting 11.11 Singles day which began with Chinese ecommerce giant Alibaba, many online marketplaces have now introduced monthly Double Digit Days like 9.9 and 10.10 with major brand discounts. Most marketplaces also have their own unique days where discounts can be expected.

Work with local certified social media partners with cross border experience, or employ local staff with social media experience.



Part three:

Payment behavior and checkout currency

Understanding and applying local payment methods is a **crucial part of cross border transactions**.

3.1 Use local payment methods

Every country will have a range of popular payment methods and these can vary widely. Seek updated, local advice so that you can select the best and most widely accepted payment methods to apply to your site’s online checkout. Up to 16% of shoppers will abandon their cart if their preferred payment option isn’t available.

3.2 Adapt checkout to local banking best practice

There’s a wide variety of payment checkout methods across different Southeast Asian countries. Singapore, for example, has a large expatriate community that uses US payment methods including credit cards, Google Pay and Apple Pay, however many locals prefer services such as mobile funds transfer systems PayNow, PayLah, GrabPay, and FavePay. Malaysian online shoppers use QR codes and the mobile payment systems DuitNow and Touch N Go, while in Indonesia, customers prefer bank transfers. Conversely, shoppers in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam prefer Cash On Delivery. Be aware of the different payment systems available in your target country, and ensure your checkout can be adjusted to cater for factors like QR codes or ATM-generated PIN codes.

3.3 Local currency

International customers expect to check out in their local currency. You can translate your online store perfectly, but unless you sell in multiple currencies, your international ambitions will stall, not scale. There is risk associated with selling in multiple currencies; sourcing a product in one currency and selling in another exposes you not only to technical complexities, but also to foreign exchange (FX) drift that can erode your profit margins.



options to help mitigate FX Drift:

1

Hedge FX rate risk

Use FX hedging as a way to protect foreign cash flow from currency fluctuations and to preserve profit margins.

2

Third party exchange

Sell in multiple currencies, automatically settle in your own, and allow a third party to exchange and convert foreign currency for you.

3

Accept multiple currencies on your storefront and checkout

Shopify Plus offers a multi-currency solution that allows buyers to check out in their preferred currency, and merchants to get paid in their local currency. This solution can automatically convert prices based on location and up-to-date FX rates. Shopify Plus can also automatically convert prices, taxes, gift cards, discounts, shipping, and refunds, to customers’ local currency, from landing page to checkout.

If your expansion plans include establishing a physical presence in a foreign country and hiring local employees, this solution means you don’t need to convert foreign currencies into your local currency for payout, which avoids FX rate risk and conversion fees.

Work with Shopify regional teams and local agencies to make sure you cater for local currency and banking expectations.

Phase two:

OPERATIONS

Part four:

Customer service

Ensure the users in your target country have a great experience on your site by providing them with **friendly, timely support, and good service.**



4.1 Make your communication methods local

Localised and available customer support is one of the best ways to convert sales and build consumer loyalty to your business. The most effective and trusted customer service arrangements usually involve hiring and training a local person who speaks the language with a local accent and can relate to your customer, and who can represent your company effectively.

4.2 Conversational commerce

Good, local, personal customer service helps translate into much higher conversions from site visits into sales, whether that's via in-person chat, or through audio or video calls, because you are starting to replicate the experience of walking into a physical store and speaking to a salesperson. Personal customer service staff can have an interaction with the customer, overcome shopper objections, and convert site visitors into buyers.

4.3 Upsell

Scalable platforms allow you to bring in extra customer support resources when times are busy. Build resources to support and train casual or contract workers, who can then upsell from customer enquiries. Start small if budgets are tight – perhaps for several hours each day, with the availability of in-person customer service clearly stated on your website; build in a 'support ticket' system to make sure all customer enquiries get a response.

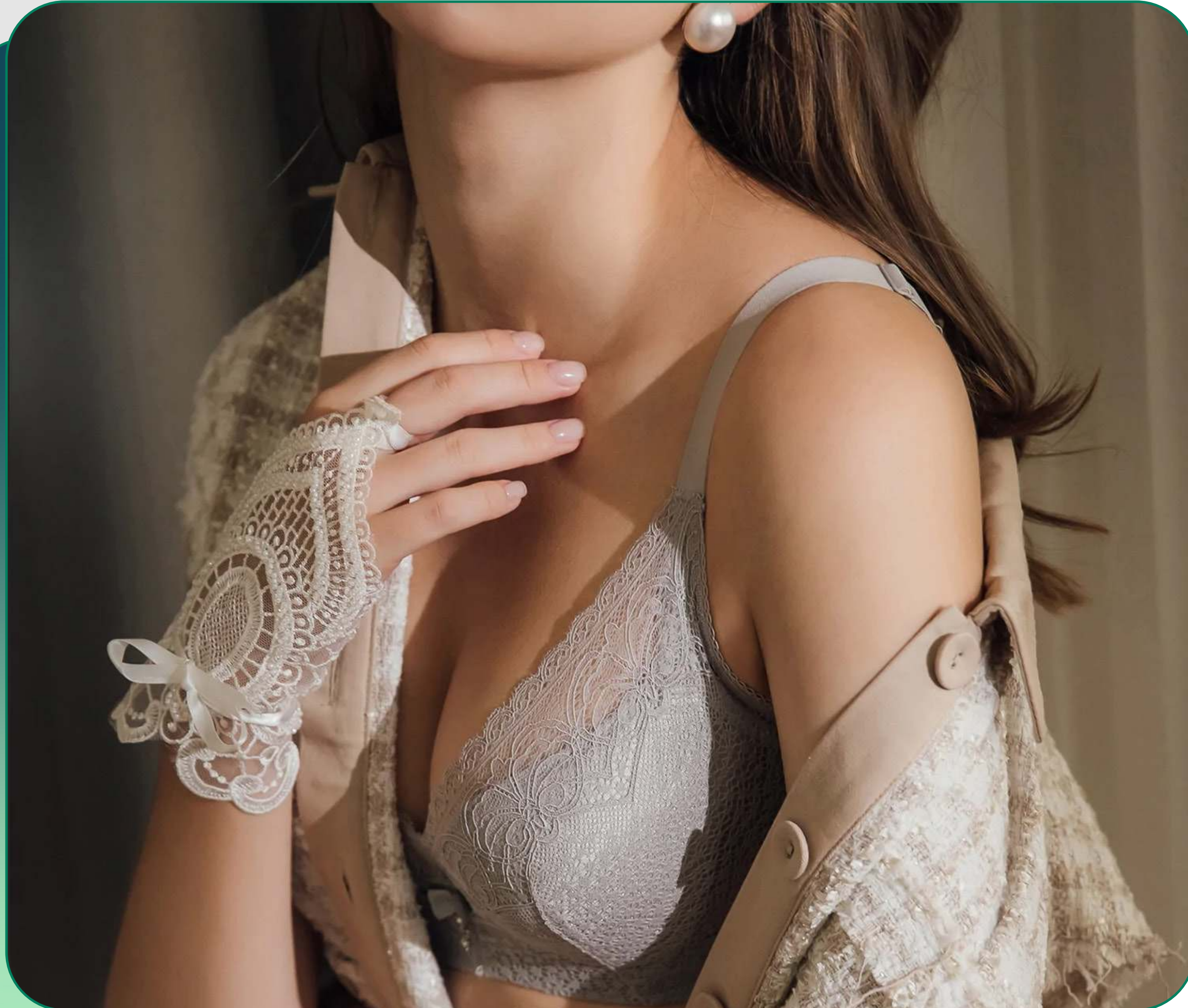
Meekco's cross border service: Customer service

Good, reliable customer service plays a vital role in ecommerce sites and is essential for building reputation, growing customer trust and loyalty, and upselling.

Meekco offers clients access to customised facilities that will strengthen their customer service:

- > Meekco client's customer call centre service
- > Meekco business Shopify + social media unify chat and service ticketing tool

Work with a platform that is scalable to chat commerce and upsell, and look to secure a local customer service agent.



DEPIC International

“Meekco’s CRO skills and local experience in Southeast Asia enable us to maximise our international online store sales and conversion rates for this part of the world. Partnering with them has opened up a new opportunity, helping our brand acquire new customers, and provide great localised service to the local customers.”

Marry Chen

Head of Marketing, DEPIC

Tax and compliance

Expanding internationally comes with **important legal requirements**, which are vital to observe. There are significant potential financial and reputational consequences for any business which ignores the rules and regulations of the country in which it trades, which can lead to substantial loss of status and ultimately, a failed expansion. **Secure good local advisors** who can also keep you up to date with regulations as they evolve.

5.1 Local address or office

Tax and compliance will vary depending on whether you have a local office, use third-party warehousing, or if you are exporting your goods directly to consumers. Shopify lets you establish your international business on a flexible platform that can be updated if you move from direct sales to a local office. Shopify will apply the tax rate appropriately, and you can even select whether you want customers to pay the tax, or whether you absorb the cost into the advertised price. Work with your logistics partner to select the most appropriate method.

5.2 Customs taxes and ‘De Minimis’ duties

Most countries now have a minimum order amount which is exempt from customs duty—typically around USD 50, although this varies in each country. When you ship direct to the customer from your own country, ensure that correct customs duty is identified, and amounts are assessed. Work with an experienced agency so that you build this advice and costs into your sale at checkout. Forewarned customers will accept these duties, if they are advised about them and have the option not to proceed, before they close the sale.

Meekco’s cross border service:

Office set-up service, shipping & payment, and tax consultation

Meekco also offers one-stop company set-up across SEA, shipping & payment gateway service, and consultation, and access to tax auditing services via partner company.

Tax collection amount by country

Country	De Minimis - No duty / tax collection amount
Brunei	400 BND (50 USD)
Cambodia	50 USD
Indonesia	75 USD
Laos	50 USD
Malaysia	500 MYR / 128 USD
Myanmar	50 USD
Philippines	10,000 PHP / 192 USD
Singapore	400 SGD / 305 USD
Thailand	1000 TB / 28 USD
Vietnam	1 Million VND / 40 USD

Part six:

Delivery and logistics (supply and return)

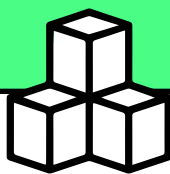
Shipping is a significant part of the customer experience. A total of 57% of shoppers say they'll cancel their orders if shipping costs are too high, and 39% will abandon cart if you don't offer free shipping. But international shoppers hold something else in even higher esteem: clear information about delivery charges before purchase.



6.1 Order-to-delivery speed

Customers vary with 'order to delivery' tolerance, or expectations about delivery times. Customers in well-serviced large cities can expect same-day or next-day shipping, and many expect free delivery. However, regional customers are often accustomed to longer shipping times. Most customer frustrations with slower delivery times can be avoided if you clearly state delivery times before the order is processed, so that the customer actively accepts the standard delivery that you can meet.

Where possible, offer a premium faster delivery service as an option.



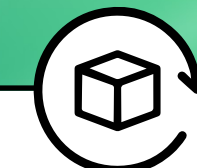
6.2 Establish a manageable SKU range

The number of different product options (stock keeping units, or SKUs) will affect your ability to fulfil orders. These vary between industries; fashion stores tend to have a high number of SKUs for example, because each item usually comes in four or more different sizes, and can also offer different colours or patterns. Aim for anything from 5 to 200 SKUs in a new market.



6.3 Explore local warehousing, 3PL, and cross border shipping

Early sales will usually involve test-shipping from your country to the new market. This can sometimes slow delivery times and add complexity because each order will need to meet local customs and duty requirements. However, once sales begin to climb, you can reduce delivery costs and streamline your cross border processes by contracting local merchants who offer a hybrid warehouse model, a ‘pick and pack’ model or third-party logistics (3PL) vendor, saving on freight as you ship in bulk. Most vendors also offer a variety of delivery options which can be added to your site checkout.



6.4 Ease of return

Install good processes for your international return operations, or reverse logistics, to avoid negative reviews. Returns to the country of origin can be slow, costly and wasteful, so select 3PL arrangements which include reverse logistics. Consumers typically expect their returns to be handled within three to five days. Plan for a range of returns contingencies (return for repair, move to inventory, or discard) so you can meet this expectation. The return and repair process accounts for 10% of total supply-chain costs, and cuts profit by up to 30%, according to the Reverse Logistics Association. Routing cross border returns to the appropriate local warehouse or 3PL, giving refunds in multiple currencies, and adjusting inventory, helps businesses to slash labour and packaging costs, while significantly improving customer-satisfaction scores.

Ensure the right SKU numbers to serve the local market needs, provide worry-free returns, and engage local 3PL fulfillment service.

Phase three:

SCALABILITY

Part seven:

Product market fit & quality service

Many businesses make the mistake of starting small without thinking big. When their sales ramp up, they struggle to meet demand and lose customers. In the early days, constantly test the fit of your product so you can adjust your marketing, then build in scalability so that you're ready to step up every element of production and distribution.



7.1 Local competitor analysis

Assess your competition in brand ecommerce sites, marketplaces, and offline retailers, to get a feel for where and how your product sits in the market, the price range that your competitors are selling in, and where there may be opportunities.

Marketplaces often indicate the volume of products sold in a particular range, and you can use a range of website traffic-assessment tools (such as SimilarWeb and Semrush) to assess a competitor's site, estimate their conversion rate, and gather data for your market planning.

7.2 Target audience

Services such as Facebook Business can give detailed audience insights including information about the potential volume of your target customer demographic by country. Marketplaces such as Shopee can deliver similar audience insights. You can also browse social media influencer posts to evaluate the popularity of products similar to your own.

7.3 Brand maturity and readiness

Within 6 to 12 months of establishing your online store, if your product quality is good and you are delivering appropriate service, the return customer rate should be somewhere around 40%. This is a good time to introduce customer loyalty programs.

7.4 Sustainable margins

The key to maintaining a successful online store is to retain a reasonable margin. A good online business should have a minimum margin of 50%. Part of this margin is needed for marketing, and some must also be directed towards innovating and optimising your website; without a healthy margin, you cannot sustain the business.

Part eight:

Resourcing your new location

Having the right people in place locally to support is key to survival and growth.

8.1 Engage local experts to hire locally

When first starting out in a new country, engage a local contractor who knows the region and customers. When sales grow and you're ready to expand and appoint permanent staff, your contractor can help you find locals with the right experience and knowledge, and assist in training them. If you're establishing a physical footprint and will engage staff, your budget must include compliance with local additional tax and employment laws.

8.2 Market A/B test your site and ads

One challenge in entering a new market is that you don't have any user history. Using A/B testing, you can test several versions of web pages, advertising, and social media with your audience to see which leads to better sales conversions. The decisions you make at this stage can have a big impact on your future sales, so it's worth investing in a qualified and experienced local media buyer with expertise in producing a range of videos, images, and copy to target different audiences.

8.3 HQ support and readiness

Ensure that you allocate resources from your current business to support the new site in its early months. Investing time will pay off, and your experienced staff in the headquarters can speed up growth by advising on products, paperwork, operations, and other issues, as the team in the new site begin to scale up. Some businesses can be reluctant to dedicate resources to a new site which is not yet making money—but this is an essential step.

8.4 Long-term goal

Establish your realistic long-term goals, and keep these in mind when you meet hurdles. Taking your cross border expansion seriously is the way to make sure it sticks. There can be many obstacles to success at the beginning, from uncertainty about price, to lack of local knowledge, or lack of media buying knowledge, but when you set a long-term goal and stick to it you will overcome failure in the early days and turn this into success.

Discuss with a local Shopify representative or experienced service partner who provides cross border services.

Final takeaway: Meekco.Asia is a Shopify Plus and Meta business specialised in helping brands set up cross border ecommerce businesses in South East Asia with many testified client success stories.

Meekco service offering

Expand your customer base into Southeast Asia with Meekco’s end-to-end ecommerce support and operations that cover everything you need to stay ahead in this dynamic market.

Meekco takes care of all aspects of cross border ecommerce, from Shopify Plus stores’ development, conversion rate optimisation, performance marketing, import regulations, and customer service. We make selling online in Southeast Asia as simple as selling domestically for you.

Shopify / Shopify Plus UI / UX development	Localisation	Payments	Logistics / 3PL	Customer service	Tax & compliances	Marketing funnel
Fulfilled by Meekco	Fulfilled by Meekco	Advisory role fulfilled by partner	Advisory role fulfilled by partner	Fulfilled by Meekco	Advisory role fulfilled by partner	Fulfilled by Meekco

Find out more about Meekco by
scanning the QR code provided

