



1. Understand the market's upheaval and opportunities

The previous business model in Saudi Arabia, which was heavily reliant on oil and gas, is increasingly being called into question by climate change and the energy transition. As a result, the Kingdom has developed its "Vision 2030" with long-term programs to ensure the country's development. New fields of business are emerging, especially in the areas of infrastructure, construction, tourism and education, which offer attractive sales opportunities for exporters. However, the market also presents challenges for Swiss exporters, such as high barriers to entry and competition from local firms and other international companies.

2. Consider local culture and traditions

Culture, religion and tradition play a central role. Exporters should ensure that their products and marketing are culturally sensitive and adapted to local norms if they want to avoid negative repercussions. For example, packaging or product descriptions must meet certain cultural or religious requirements (e.g. halal certifications). Traditions can change too, though – as illustrated by the role played by women in the Saudi world of work. "Vision 2030" actively promotes the participation of women in various professional fields, which is also having an increasing impact on business relationships.

While Saudi business partners are often familiar with Western culture, many Western managers know little about Arab culture. However, it is crucial that they understand and appreciate this.

3. Choose the best possible business model

The Saudi market poses many challenges, which is why it is often not easy to tap into it from Switzerland. It can be a good idea to find a local partner or even set up your own branch office. The right business model for a particular company needs to be appraised on an individual basis, taking factors such as internal resources and knowledge, the skills of a potential local business partner and the needs of local customers into account.

4. The right business partner is key

A business partnership should be chosen carefully. It's similar to a marriage: how the relationship feels is initially more important than objective considerations, and shared goals and visions are crucial.

5. Long-term planning, not short-term success

Simply trying to shift large volumes is generally not a recipe for success. It's important to build long-term relationships and understand your customers' individual needs.

6. Leveraging digital skills

People in the Gulf region are very digitally savvy. Companies without digital-driven business processes will find it difficult to remain competitive.

7. Sales pitches: personal and direct

In Saudi Arabia, price negotiations and crucial sales talks are best conducted in person. The primary objective is to build a basis of mutual trust. In Arab culture, people's professional and private lives are largely intertwined. There is a place for online interactions, but this is not at the beginning or end of the sales process.



It must always be expected that the final decision will be made by people who were not involved in the sales process, but who are of the appropriate age (seniority) or who come from a high-ranking or well-known family. The aim must be to establish a relationship with the decision-maker.

8. After-sales service for a competitive edge

Customers will accept a basic level of quality if the price is right. If Swiss exporters want to see off cheaper competitors, they can win customers over with good after-sales service. Saudi clients often expect a high level of support and that problems will be resolved swiftly

9. Tell stories instead of presenting facts

Arabs love stories. A well-told, personal story often opens more doors than mere facts and figures.

10. Expect delays

In Saudi Arabia, deadlines and agreements are often not binding, and there is a tendency for payments to be made late. This should be taken into account when drawing up contracts and calculating prices.

11. Ensure regular communication

Open, regular communication is important to avoid misunderstandings. Criticism should be expressed in a positive and supportive manner, preferably in one-to-one situations and not in groups. When shared in front of a larger group, criticism could be perceived as a loss of face.

Swiss businesspeople are often not proactive enough: frequent contact is necessary to initiate and maintain the desired sales efforts and support activities. Inquiries should be answered quickly, as this builds trust. The preferred communication channels include WhatsApp and specific business communication platforms.

12. Use empathy and humor

Empathy and a respectful use of humor can help build a positive relationship with Saudi partners. However, humor should always be used in a culturally appropriate way: politics and religion are taboo topics.

The question of ethics: is it permissible to do business with Saudi Arabia?

Exporting to Saudi Arabia is ethically controversial. Benefits include economic interests and geopolitical partnerships, though there are also drawbacks such as human rights violations. The Kingdom has made efforts to improve its international reputation and human rights situation in recent years, but there is a long road ahead. Deciding whether (or not) to export to Saudi Arabia is ultimately up to each individual company itself.

The article contains key tips for Swiss exporters from the guide "[Erfolgreiche Geschäfte in der Golfregion – wie Exporteure mit dem Wandel in Saudi-Arabien und den Golfstaaten umgehen können](#)" by Professor Paul Ammann and Gerald Drissner, published by Springer Gabler Verlag in 2024. This book not only contains tips to help exporters from the DACH region with entering the market, but also specific success stories, the opinions of local businesspeople and background on the Kingdom's culture and society.

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