

The three founders and owners of AV EMEA – Martin Harding, Michael Kwetters and Peter Schoon



How AV EMEA help grow your business

Every business's goal is to increase sales but sometimes it can be hard to know how to achieve this. **Amy Wallington** talks to **Martin Harding** from **AV EMEA** about how they are helping to increase their partner brands international sales.

What is AV EMEA?

In its most basic form we are a service provider. We help companies in the AV and custom install industry to take care of their international business, find new markets, develop existing customers, and, effectively, we act as a company's export managers.

Large companies and big brands can afford their own export sales team and have regional offices around the world. However, smaller firms often don't have enough sales to pay for a professional export manager, at least at the beginning – or just don't have knowledge of how international business is done. Therefore, we started this business 10 years ago to cater to this market and, in many cases, the clients that work with us have been working with us for the entire time. Gradually over the years, the brands that we work with have grown and prospered.

What areas of the world do you cover?

As the name AV EMEA suggests, we focus on Europe, the Middle East and Africa – and Asia Pacific for several of our clients too. We don't touch the Americas at all as it is simply not our area of expertise. Our team all come from this industry; we are all experienced international export guys and we have spent our whole careers in the AV industry. We are a team of four and we each look after different geographical areas based on our experience, but also support each other when necessary.

Do you take on any brands, or are there requirements?

Without sounding arrogant, we are very choosy about who we deal with. For starters, we want to add value to that brand, and we know that a relationship with a company is not going to last very long if we can't add any value. It's not

about making a bit of commission on anything we can sell; it's about building relationships and trust. We tend to grow steadily with a brand or two at most per year. Also, we are usually looking for something that adds a new category to our business and does not compete with one of our existing partners.

Our motto when considering a new partner brand is 'people, products, profit'. First we talk to the people we will be working with. Do we like them? Can we work with them? We really like to get to know our potential customers and make sure we are all on the same page.

The next thing is the products. Do they suit us? Do we understand how to sell them? Can we put the products into our distribution channels? Would our customers be interested?

Then last of all comes the profit. How much can we make out of it? Some companies have come to us in the past with very generous offers, and even though it might be tempting, if the other two things aren't right for us, we know that it's not going to be a long term business.

How do you manage your brands?

We have one person product managing each brand and we choose that brand depending on our own personal experience and our interests and skills. For example, I usually manage the hi-fi



The training suite in AV EMEA's offices in Holland



Welcome counter at the AV EMEA ISE 2020 booth

brands because that's where my history predominantly lies, and as my colleague Peter is extremely technical he tends to focus on the CI brands that need a lot of support. We simply choose the most appropriate person for the brand.

We essentially work as consultants. We are very close with all of our suppliers and are treated as an extension of their team – so we carry business cards from each brand. If we are going to visit a new customer in Italy for example, we're not usually there to promote AV EMEA – generally speaking we have meetings set up for each specific brand. So although they might have seen AV EMEA in our marketing efforts, social media or have visited our website, we will introduce ourselves initially as being there on behalf of the brand by handing them their business card.

When people get to know us, they often joke about which business card we're going to give them that day because they know we wear several hats! But for us, it's important that we are an extension of the brand's sales team. We do a lot of marketing and brand building for them and we are on the inside track with pricing, product strategy, product images and embargoes, and we send out emails to our dealers and distributors when new products are announced. That's how we most like to be treated by our brands – as a trusted, integral part of their team, not like the 'hired help'.

What's the biggest difference between AV EMEA and a sales rep?

We don't work for anyone on commission only, which is why we win a bit when someone calls us 'a rep' because essentially, reps are often there simply to sell, and nothing more. But what we do is to help our brands to develop their sales and distribution around the world for the long term. Part of that is brand building, brand development, frequent customer contacts – and the trust that is built up over time by us, our customers and our brands.

How do you push the brands out there to the industry?

Until now, we have always had a pretty significant booth at ISE every year. All our brands join us on the booth and each send over one of their top executives, usually the president of the company, to work on the booth with us. As we are talking to a customer about a specific area they are interested in, we can then introduce them to the executive from the most relevant brand. Obviously in the new Covid-influenced world that we all live in, shows and travel are much reduced, but to compensate for that we are active every week hosting webinars for our brands, to educate both current and prospective customers about our brands and products.

In a sense, we are like 'marriage brokers'. Unlike some distribution companies who really try to hide their customers from the brand because they don't want them to 'go direct', we have always had the viewpoint that we give our brands full visibility of what we are up to and who we are talking to. After all, the brand is paying us so it's their right to know all of these distributors and market feedback. 'Knowledge is power' – and if we share the knowledge of what's going on in a market, that helps them to know what products to develop and what prices they need to be successful.

Sometimes we joke that we are the oil in the engine; you don't necessarily see us but you miss us when we're not there! We are keeping things moving and ensuring that you get to your desired destination.

Tell me about the distribution side of your business?

Normally, what happens when a brand comes to us and says they want to work with us in Europe, for example, our first statement to them is that they will need to have local stock. The days are long gone where an installer in Europe will wait for something to be flown over from America. They need what they want quickly – sometimes the very next day!

We have two ways to help with that. We have a very close relationship with a well-

known, family owned third-party logistics company that has been in business for around 30 years and is focused on the AV industry. They take care of all the warehousing and logistics for many of the brands we represent and hold the stock on behalf of the brand so they work directly for them. When we sell something, we pass the order on to the company, who contact the warehouse and get their goods shipped according to their terms or the customer's request.

We also have a sister company which sits alongside AV EMEA BV called AV Distributors BV, which we founded and funded some years ago. Sometimes the manufacturer simply doesn't want to keep stock in Europe or, for their own fiscal or tax reasons, doesn't want to have what's known as a fiscal entity outside their home country, or the hassle of foreign bank accounts or offshore warehouses, so we set up this distribution company alongside AV EMEA as a service. So, for some of our brands, AV Distributors is their only customer in this region, and we do everything they would normally have to do themselves, and instead of making a commission we make a margin instead.

You also have a service company, right?

Yes, we also take care of all the servicing in Europe for our brands who need it. Again, it's a third-party Dutch company who we have known for years, and they are very experienced down to component level repairs. But putting it simply, if anything breaks, things don't need to be sent back to the manufacturer as we have local technicians here that can fix things.

As I said, we are first and foremost a service company – and we take great pride in giving a high level of service to our customers, whether that is distributors, importers, custom installers or retailers, and to the brands who we work for too of course. There isn't another 'full service' business like ours in the AV business as far as we are aware, so we are proud to have reached our tenth anniversary while still retaining our unique business model.

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