Country launch playbook

How to open a second market in West Africa without stalling the first

From the practitioner
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OPERATING MANUAL · CROSS-BORDER EXPANSION

How to open a second market in West Africa without stalling the first

A sequence of seven decisions for opening a second market, from choosing the country to the review after ninety days of trading. Use it when demand outside your home market is real and you need a launch that does not pull your best people away from the business that pays for it.

For: CEOs, COOs and expansion leads · Time: One planning workshop, then six to nine months

When to use this manual

Use this manual once you have evidence that customers outside your home market want what you sell: inbound requests, partners asking to resell, or customers already paying from another country. It assumes the home business is stable enough to fund the launch for at least twelve months without the new market contributing revenue. If either is not true yet, start with the readiness checks below and come back to the sequence when they are met.

Before you start

[ ] Evidence of demand: at least twenty conversations with potential customers in the target market
[ ] A twelve-month launch budget approved by the board, including a contingency of a quarter
[ ] A named executive sponsor who is not also running the home market day to day
[ ] Your core processes written down well enough for a new team to follow them
[ ] A clear view of the licences, permits or registrations the target market requires

The sequence

1. Choose the market

Pick one country on evidence rather than proximity or a founder's network.

Decision	Which single market to enter next, and which to rule out for now
Owner	CEO, with the board
Check before moving on	A one-page comparison of three candidate markets on demand, regulation, competition and cost to serve

2. Confirm the legal and licensing route

Know exactly what you need before you can trade, and how long it takes.

Decision	Which licence or registration route to pursue, and whether to use local counsel or a partner's licence
Owner	Head of legal or compliance
Check before moving on	A first meeting held with the regulator or its published guidance reviewed by local counsel

3. Set the entry model

Decide how you will operate on the ground.

Decision	Subsidiary, partnership, acquisition or remote service, and what that means for control and cost
Owner	CEO and CFO, approved by the board
Check before moving on	A financial model for the first three years under the chosen model, with the break-even month marked

4. Appoint the country lead and agree decision rights

Give one person ownership of the market, with authority to match.

Decision	Who leads the country, and which decisions they own, propose or are informed of
Owner	CEO
Check before moving on	A signed decision-rights table, shared with head office functions before the country lead starts

5. Build the minimum local team and systems

Set up only what you need to serve the first customers well.

Decision	Which roles are local, which stay at head office, and which systems are extended rather than rebuilt
Owner	Country lead and COO
Check before moving on	Every customer-facing process tested end to end with a real transaction

6. Soft launch with a limited group

Learn from a small set of customers before you spend on growth.

Decision	Which customers to start with, for how long, and what success looks like
Owner	Country lead
Check before moving on	Weekly review of activation, complaints and unit economics for at least eight weeks

7. Launch fully and review at ninety days

Scale what works and fix what does not, on a fixed date.

Decision	Whether to accelerate, hold or change the model, based on the ninety-day review
Owner	CEO and country lead, reported to the board
Check before moving on	A ninety-day review against the targets set in stage three, with a written decision

Who decides what

Decision	Head office	Country lead	Board
Choice of market	Proposes	Not yet appointed	Approves
Local pricing	Approves the range	Sets within the range	Informed
Local hiring	Approves the plan	Owns	Informed
Product changes for the market	Owns	Proposes	Informed
Regulatory engagement	Owns	Supports	Informed
Go or no-go at ninety days	Proposes	Proposes	Approves

Where it goes wrong

Copying home-market pricing

Early sign: Win rates in the first month are far above or far below the home market
What to do: Price from local willingness to pay and local cost to serve, then set a range head office approves once

A country lead without authority

Early sign: Routine decisions wait days for head office, and the lead starts copying everyone into email
What to do: Agree and publish the decision-rights table in stage four, and review it at thirty days

Founders running both markets

Early sign: Home-market measures slip in the same quarter as the launch
What to do: Name a sponsor for the launch who does not run the home business day to day, and protect the home team's calendar

The checklist

[ ] Evidence of demand: at least twenty conversations with potential customers in the target market
[ ] A twelve-month launch budget approved by the board, including a contingency of a quarter
[ ] A named executive sponsor who is not also running the home market day to day
[ ] Your core processes written down well enough for a new team to follow them
[ ] A clear view of the licences, permits or registrations the target market requires
[ ] A one-page comparison of three candidate markets on demand, regulation, competition and cost to serve
[ ] A first meeting held with the regulator or its published guidance reviewed by local counsel
[ ] A financial model for the first three years under the chosen model, with the break-even month marked
[ ] A signed decision-rights table, shared with head office functions before the country lead starts
[ ] Every customer-facing process tested end to end with a real transaction
[ ] Weekly review of activation, complaints and unit economics for at least eight weeks
[ ] A ninety-day review against the targets set in stage three, with a written decision

From the practitioner

> “The second market almost never fails on demand. It fails because the people who built the first market try to run both, and the country lead is given a title without the authority to decide anything. Settle decision rights before you hire, and protect the home team’s time as carefully as the launch budget.”

Adaeze Okafor, Former Chief Operating Officer, a pan-African payments company

Questions

How long does it take to open a second market in West Africa?

Most companies need six to nine months from choosing the market to full launch. Licensing usually sets the pace: a payments or lending licence can take longer than the rest of the launch combined, so start that conversation first.

Should we set up a subsidiary or work through a partner?

A partner is faster and cheaper to start but gives you less control over the customer. A subsidiary costs more upfront but lets you build the business you want. Stage three of this manual sets out how to compare the two on a three-year model.

Who should lead the new country?

Someone who knows the market well and has run a team, given clear authority over local hiring, pricing within an agreed range and day-to-day operations. Sending a trusted head-office manager without local knowledge is a common and expensive shortcut.

What should the board see before approving a launch?

The market comparison, the licensing route, the three-year model for the chosen entry model and the decision-rights table. Together they show the board the risk, the cost and who is accountable.

Want a practitioner to help you put this to work? Start a diagnostic at portsandbridges.com/diagnostic or write to info@portsandbridges.com.