The question of routes to market encompasses issues around operating within the constraints of the organization’s field of endeavor. In other words, the nature of the terrain has been established through market assessment, and the organization’s own capabilities are better understood, and it is therefore possible to make decisions about modes of operation in the market. And operation requires, in some form, the presence to make it effective.

What is presence?

In a global strategic context, market presence equates to the level of visible organizational activity within a territory or region. This can encompass anything from a unadvertised but accessible web site, to a low-level sales and marketing operation managed in-country by a local agent, through to a full-scale manufacturing subsidiary supporting high-profile direct sales activity throughout an entire region.

In short, the concept of presence is built upon the age-old fact of life that, beyond actually doing some particular thing and even doing it well, it is useful to be seen to be doing it in such a way as to leave a memorable impression and attract further attention to the enterprise. A higher level of market presence also supplies opportunities for regular, direct and active observation of the market and sets the stage for a closer understanding of the market in the long term, allowing the accumulation of a corporate base of knowledge that can be further leveraged as developments within the market permit. In this way presence is used to both fulfil and maximize opportunity by promoting a focused approach to key markets.
Degree of presence is not necessarily tied to a specific route to market. It is possible to maintain a high profile through a website that does not translate into physical infrastructure in the form of a retail establishment. Similarly for some organizations with a comprehensive global presence even a direct sales operation in a small market can function as a low-key presence that keeps the organization’s name ticking over in that territory. Appropriate levels of presence depend on the strategic objectives of the organization.

The need for presence arises from many sources. On the most obvious level, sustained market presence provides visibility to the customer base and allows the development of a broad range of national contacts amongst both the customer and supplier base, and these relationships can be expanded and deepened over time. Beyond this, it is also of practical benefit to take the time to identify and cultivate opinion leaders or other influential individuals or organizations in the marketplace. Whether such opinion leaders are willing or able to endorse products or organizations is generally an individual matter, but in any case their local awareness can make them valuable barometers of market conditions.

This leads into the wider issue of maintaining and enhancing local market and competitor information in a systematic way. It is reasonable to assume that market characteristics can and will change over time, and these changes can most effectively be tracked and potentially anticipated and appropriate responses put in place through a market monitoring program which relies in part on direct market feedback. Through direct presence it is easier not only to monitor customer demand and product or service preferences but to elucidate the motivations behind these preferences, giving the organization an improved chance of avoiding long-term stagnation.

Promotion of the organization and its product offerings may, depending on the market segment, benefit strongly from focus on the local market through demonstrating responsiveness to customer needs and desires. Increased presence enhances the ability to proactively manage the market, possibly through identifying opportunities for expansion or extension to new or more profitable products and services, or through identifying the appropriate moment to reduce presence in a contracting market. It also enables a more direct grip on quality control issues, whether these relate to product functionality or to issues of logistics and customer service and support.

One of the most important but least appreciated aspects of market presence is as a show of commitment to a territory in which the organ-