



The BOLT Internationalisation Award

1. Business Model and International Motives

a. Business Model and Suitability for Internationalisation

Dr Sunshine operates a simple but scalable business model that is well suited for international growth. The product is a Comfort Kit for children, made up of items that can be easily sourced from different suppliers. This makes the kit modular, meaning it can be adapted and reproduced in different countries without relying on one specific supplier or country.

Malta is ideal as a testing market. Because it is small, the team could test demand, pricing and operations with low financial risk. Surveys showed that customers were willing to pay € 20 per kit. Working backwards, the team set a target profit of € 5 per kit, meaning the total cost of items and packaging had to stay within € 15. During testing, items were bought at retail prices, so costs were higher; however, this helped prove that once items are bought in bulk, the target margins are achievable - an important point for international expansion.

The business model in Malta relied mainly on pre-selling. Kits were only assembled once enough orders were received, reducing the risk of unsold stock and cash-flow problems. Customers who wanted a kit immediately could still buy one, but at a higher price. This pre-sale approach is especially useful for international markets because it allows demand to be tested before large amounts of money are spent.

For international markets, the team understands that kits cannot be assembled in Malta and shipped abroad due to cost and logistics. Instead, Dr Sunshine plans to grow through licensing. One licensee per country will assemble and distribute the kits locally, following clear brand and quality rules. Dr Sunshine will keep control of the brand, product guidelines and intellectual property.

A key part of this model is the planned trademark registration of the name “Dr Sunshine” and the Sunny teddy bear character under NICE Classes 16 and 28. This turns Dr Sunshine into a licensable brand, not just a product, making it much easier to scale internationally.

b. Research Behind Distribution Channels

The choice of distribution channels was based on research, expert advice and real testing in Malta. Early on, the team met with Klaus Pedersen from TradeMalta, who advised against expensive export models and encouraged partner-led and licensing approaches to reduce risk and costs. This helped shape the decision to avoid shipping kits from Malta and instead work with partners in the destination market.

The team met with Christabelle Borg, founder of 6fiftytwo, who is currently internationalising her business. She emphasised the importance of carrying out due diligence and selecting partners carefully to ensure strong brand alignment and long-term success.

Desk research showed very limited competition internationally, especially in Europe, for structured children's hospital comfort kits. This supported the idea that a flexible, local distribution model would be more effective than centralised exports.

The Malta rollout provided real experience in packaging, order handling and delivery, all of which can be replicated by licensees in other countries. Based on this research, the team decided to target Ireland, where the market is larger, English is the main language and local delivery platforms already exist.

c. Key Partners Supporting Internationalisation

Dr Sunshine's international plan depends on a small number of carefully chosen partners. TradeMalta supports market entry and export planning, while Christabelle Borg provides practical mentoring based on real experience. In Ireland, the company has already secured a Letter of Intent from Toyuland Cash and Carry, a well-established distributor with over 60 years of experience, demonstrating early international interest and validation of the model.

Local delivery platforms such as Bolt can support last-mile distribution. The most important partner, however, is the country licensee. Each licensee will handle sourcing, assembly, and distribution locally, using approved suppliers such as stationery retailers, book wholesalers, and homeware stores. This approach keeps costs low, improves speed, and ensures the brand can scale in a controlled and consistent manner.

2. Market Knowledge and International Marketing Effort

a. Comparative Advantage

Dr Sunshine's main competitive advantage is that it operates in a very specific niche with little competition, especially in Europe. Online research showed that most similar products are based in the US or UK, and very few offer a scalable, branded solution for children in hospital. Another advantage is the hybrid model. Dr Sunshine is not a charity, but it is also not a normal gift box business. It combines social impact with commercial sustainability, meaning it can grow without relying on donations. The Sunny character and trademark strategy also make the brand harder to copy.

b. Growth Potential of Ireland

Ireland has a population of around 5 million, compared to Malta's 500,000. It also has many more paediatric hospitals and a strong network of children's NGOs. This creates several market segments - individual buyers, sponsored kits, NGOs, schools, companies and hospitals. Sales in Malta were achieved with very little marketing, suggesting strong untapped demand. If the model worked in Malta, it is likely to perform even better in cities like Dublin, Cork and Galway.

c. Marketing Opportunities: Malta vs Ireland

Marketing in Malta relied on word-of-mouth, community support and founder visibility. In Ireland, the strategy will shift to partnerships, NGOs, digital marketing and CSR campaigns. Ireland's strong NGO and corporate CSR culture offers opportunities that simply do not exist at the same scale in Malta.

3. Innovation

a. Innovation Developed

The main innovation at Dr Sunshine is not the product itself, but the licensing-based business model. Instead of exporting kits, the team will be designing a system that allows local partners to assemble and sell kits while following strict brand rules. This reduces cost, risk and complexity.

b. Research Behind the Innovation

Research from the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) website showed that licensing is a recognised way to expand internationally without large investment. The team consulted with Matthew Pisani the Director of Industrial Property Registration and trademark searches confirmed that Dr Sunshine can be registered in the correct classes, supporting licensing. The team also evaluated other options such as exporting, which were rejected due to cost and low margins.

c. Prioritising Innovation

Innovation was prioritised by identifying early that the Malta model would not work internationally. Different options were compared using clear criteria such as cost, scalability and brand control. Licensing was chosen because it best supports international growth.

d. Innovation Beyond the Company Programme

After the Company Programme, the team plans to grow the Sunny character into stationery, toys and possibly digital content. In the long term, Sunny could become a cartoon or educational character focused on comfort and emotional support. The licensing model allows these ideas to be tested in foreign markets without high risk.