For just about as long as there have been cars around in the United States, so have there been gearheads—people who seek to personalize and improve upon their rides. Fast forward to 2019, and the phenomenon is now a $44.6 billion industry in the U.S. and many millions more abroad, as car culture has become an increasingly global phenomenon.

The Australian, Northern European and Canadian car scenes are nearly as old as that in the U.S., with consumers in other countries more recently sharing the love of the automobile. As international markets for specialty products have grown, so has the demand for U.S. products as overseas consumers seek to upgrade their rides for a wide array of passions, including racing, off-roading, restoring classic cars, and improving the comfort and styling of their daily drivers.

SEMA members seeking to grow their global market share face some common questions and perhaps early stumbling blocks when trying to launch their international sales. That includes everything from how to start a strategic export plan (such as prioritizing international markets and selecting potential customers) to gaining insight into the wants and unique car cultures in various overseas markets and marketing products for vehicles available for sale in the targeted market. All the while, entrepreneurs must implement best practices to protect their brands and reputations.

It sounds like a daunting task, but there are resources available to assist SEMA members to launch or expand their overseas sales, and U.S. goods are already finding their way overseas.

An estimated 70% to 80% of SEMA-member products are already finding their way to global customers. In a December 2018 SEMA survey, 84% of participating manufacturers based in the U.S. reported that overseas sales already contribute to their bottom lines. A subset of companies participating in the survey noted that they have been making good progress in developing overseas distribution in a growing number of markets. Other companies reported that their products are sold on eBay or through manufacturers’ websites to end users, and some through U.S.-based warehouse distributors who then export products around the globe or have sold ad hoc to trade buyers who might’ve been met at the SEMA Show or through email introductions.

For those companies interested in growing their overseas sales but needing assistance in identifying, prioritizing and gearing up their exports, SEMA offers a number of resources. Below are just a few of them.

**SEMA Overseas Business Development Program**

Sign up for the SEMA Middle East trip the UAE and Saudi Arabia planned for March 31–April 7, 2020. This overseas business development program, held in partnership with the U.S. government, is the 24th trip SEMA has organized to provide members with a low-cost, high-value, turnkey trip to explore promising markets overseas.

The Middle East market, with its high
disposable income coupled with a passion for personalization as well as its strong racing and off-roading scene, is a very attractive region. Companies participating in the Middle East trip will exhibit at Abu Dhabi-based Custom Show Emirates; tour specialty-equipment shops in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; and participate in networking sessions and briefings. U.S. government grants are available for qualified companies, reducing the cost of participating. Registration opens in November.

SEMA is also exploring additional venues for overseas trips to promising regions such as Scandinavia and South Africa, along with future return trips to key markets such as Australia and China. To date, 203 SEMA companies have traveled on one or more of these programs, reporting more than $150 million in export sales.

Connect With International Buyers and Media at the 2019 SEMA Show

Thousands of trade buyers from throughout the world will descend on Las Vegas for the 2019 SEMA Show. In fact, more than 20% of all buyers at the SEMA Show are once again expected to be purchasing products for end users residing in 140 countries located outside the United States. The largest number of international buyers will be coming from countries that include Canada, Mexico, Australia, Germany, Brazil, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Colombia and China.

The following programs were created for exhibitors to network with buyers outside of Show hours.

• **Roundtable Discussions, Monday, November 4:** Attend hour-long roundtable discussions with top international buyers and editorial media even before the SEMA Show begins. During the roundtables, participants will discover how to explore international markets through SEMA-sponsored trips and obtain U.S. government funds to defray costs; exchange business cards with attending international buyers and invite them to your booth; and learn about sales potential for their products in the featured markets.

Three discussions will be held, starting with a meeting with trade buyers and other stakeholders from the Middle East, including representatives from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman. This first roundtable will convene from 11:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m., followed by a luncheon discussion with trade buyers and media from the Australian and New Zealand markets from 12:00 p.m.–1:00 p.m. The last session of the day will highlight opportunities in the Latin American market from 2:00 p.m.–3:00 p.m. All three sessions will be held in room N252 in the Las Vegas Convention Center (LVCC).

• **Register for the International Happy Hour:** On Wednesday, November 6, from 5:00 p.m.–6:30 p.m., network with international resellers, editorial media and fellow exhibitors at the close of the Show day. More than 1,000 companies are expected to attend this year’s networking party, and exhibitors can register free at www.sema.org/international.

• **Be the Recipient of a Global Media Award:** Get your new products in front of buyers and the media (including international media) by participating in the New Products Showcase. A group of 35 top automotive journalists from more than 20 countries will once again be selecting the winners of the prestigious Global Media Awards (GMA). Each GMA judge will select 10 products from the New Products Showcase that he or she thinks will most appeal to consumers in their home markets. Winning companies will be recognized at the International Happy Hour, receiving Global Media Awards that signify the global appeal of their products and their companies.

Center for International Commerce

Located in LVCC room N255, the Center for International Commerce offers complimentary private meeting space and interpreters to facilitate meetings between exhibitors and international buyers. A team of interpreters will be on hand to assist in bilingual communication in key languages such as French, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese and Portuguese. Exhibitors are welcome to use these export-oriented services.

International Vehicle Measuring Program

U.S. vehicles such as American musclecars, Jeeps and pickups are popular throughout the world and create opportunities for products made for the U.S
A Nissan Patrol Y61 is the latest vehicle SEMA imported to provide its members access to non-U.S. vehicles popularly customized around the world. This fifth-generation, left-hand-drive truck was built in Japan for the UAE market. It has a five-speed manual transmission and 4.8L petrol six-cylinder. This vehicle is currently sold in the Middle East, South Africa, certain Central American countries and the Philippines, among others. There is also a large pool of Y61s in Australia and New Zealand, though sales in these markets stopped in 2016.

market to also be sold globally. Additional opportunities exist to provide products for vehicles popularly customized overseas but not sold in the United States. SEMA has created a program to make these vehicles available to SEMA members in order to create export-ready products.

Since its inception nine years ago, the goal of the SEMA International Vehicle Measuring Program has been to make it easier for members to access popular international vehicles not sold in the United States. SEMA members are now invited to measure two vehicles: a Nissan Patrol Y61 and a '16 Australian-spec Ford Ranger 4x4 double-cab. With the Ranger’s entrance into the U.S. market this year, members can view the multiple differences between the rest-of-the-world Ranger and the model sold in the United States.

Schedule a time to measure one or both vehicles at the SEMA Garage in Diamond Bar, California. The trucks can also be transported to your facility, if needed.

These are the sixth and seventh vehicles available through the program, which SEMA launched in partnership with the U.S. Department of Commerce. There is no charge for members to measure the vehicles.

To reserve a truck, contact Stephanie Martinez at stephanie@sema.org.

Protected Your Intellectual Property at Home and Abroad

When members think about expanding their sales overseas, they should first take steps to protect their companies’ intellectual property (IP). Laws on trademarks (brand names, logos, slogans), patents (inventions), and copyrights (drawings, photos and product guides) vary by country, so it is useful to make a list of where the company plans to sell, the products it wants to sell, and the IP associated with each product.

It is important to register IP rights with the appropriate government agencies in the United States and in the relevant foreign markets. For example, if a company based in California decided to sell its Brand X wheels in China, it would be best positioned to do so from an IP standpoint if it first registered its trademark for Brand X in the United States and in China.

Developing a relationship with a trustworthy distributor in the foreign country will also help with enforcing rights overseas, as the distributor will have a vested interest in making sure that local competitors do not knock off the product.

To help members navigate IP issues, SEMA maintains informational materials online at www.sema.org/ipr, and staff is available year-round to help answer IP-related questions.

Ultimately, companies may need legal counsel outside of SEMA to represent their interests and advise on specifics, but SEMA is here to provide information and help guide members in the right direction.

For more information about SEMA’s international programs or to suggest a new overseas venue or an international vehicle to include in the lending program, contact Linda Spencer at lindas@sema.org.