

Eight Steps to Creating an Effective Global Web Site

IT WAS THOUGHT THAT BY THE END OF 2000 MORE than half of all Internet users would reside outside the United States. However, according to a study conducted by NUA Internet Surveys in September 2002, 70 percent of all Internet users lived outside the United States and Canada. It is nearly 2005—can you imagine how this percentage must have increased?



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Nearly every American corporation has a Web presence, but only 15 percent offer their Web site in more than one language. With so few companies globalizing, there are few models to build on, few established standards and little direction and support. Yet if you have a Web site, you know other countries can access it, and if they can reach you, you need to be able to communicate with them. This is especially important for a small business without a sales force that needs technology to help it sell.

The following tips have been gathered from experience, and from Web managers who have worked through the “pitfalls” of building a multilingual site. Hopefully, they will save you a lot of frustration, and make the process of building a successful multilingual Web site a lot easier.

Step 1: What Languages Do You Need?

Don't try to do too much too quickly. Building one language at a time will reduce the risk. The lessons you learn from the first language will help save time and money on the next. If you have a choice between beginning with a European or an Asian language, you might be better off starting with the European, because Asian languages require “double-byte” character sets and are technically and linguistically more challenging.



An effective global Web site describes products/services in the simplest, most universal way. For example, “Slam Dunk” or “Strike Out” are sports analogies derived from typical American pastimes easily understood in the United States, but may leave businesses or customers overseas scratching their heads.

Step 2: Make it Obvious and Easy to Access

Make sure as each viewer visits your Web site, they know immediately the information can be accessed in different languages. The best way to offer them a choice is to allow visitors to “select” a language from a drop-down menu with the language label in English and in the language of the country. This is also a great way to use space more efficiently. Some companies have used flags of the country, but this, although colorful and graphically interesting, doesn't always work. Many flags can easily represent more than one language.

Step 3: Localize Content

Be sure to tailor the content to the specific requirements and needs of the local audience. Don't forget to include differences in: currency, time and date formatting, measurements, writing style and color, image and photo selection. Don't use Americanisms and clichés. Describe your product/service in the simplest most universal way. For example, “Slam Dunk” or “Strike Out” are sports analogies derived from typical American pastimes easily understood in the United States, but may leave businesses or customers overseas scratching their heads.

Step 4: Eliminate Excess Wording

You are working in a different media now—one where ease and efficiency is key. Write concisely, using as few words as possible. You might want to scale back to a less graphics-intensive site. By doing this, you make the site load faster in the native country and you make ongoing text management a whole lot easier. Redesigning your Web site may cost you some time initially, but in the long run, you will save time.

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Step 5: Expect Expansion of Text

Translating into European languages often results in the target text expanding by as much as 20 percent. On the other hand, Asian text often contracts. Avoid placing text on images or creating images from text. If you need to place text on an image, be sure to allow enough space so that the text can expand without impacting the overall design of the site. Remember, you must have the proper fonts loaded for Japanese, Chinese, Hebrew, and Arabic to view these pages properly (possibly an enabled browser). This shouldn't be a problem for Western European languages because English browsers share the same character set.

Step 6: Develop Good Business Practices

Be sure you have a process in place for answering inquiries. Remember that once you have a global site, other parts of an organization may be impacted. Be sure customer service, fulfillment and finance are ready to meet these needs. Many a successful marketing campaign has failed because companies were not able to fulfill response. In order to manage all aspects of customer service and marketing, you should be prepared to have on staff people

who are fluent in the appropriate language. This will require planning and budgeting sufficiently upfront. Also be sure to make clear on your Web site the types of support that will be provided, and those that will not.

Step 7: Test the Site

Whenever possible, use "in-country" testers. The best way to do this is to use dedicated, independent testers including your overseas affiliates if any. A number of Web localization vendors provide these services. This step is important because you will ensure the functionality, quality and consistency of your Web site.

Step 8: Don't Forget to Advertise in Foreign Markets

Advertising and search engine registration are even more important in foreign countries than they are in the United States. ■

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