



# Cross-cultural Interactive Marketing & Website Usability

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## Going beyond words: from translation to localisation

Whether a company is an established multinational, or a small company expanding for the first time into overseas markets, a well-coordinated international sales and marketing effort is critical for success.

A website can serve as a company's premier marketing tool, a facilitator of direct sales, a technical support mechanism, or it can be used for purposes of public, customer, investor or employee relations. When users are able to successfully interact with a website, positive impressions and attitudes about both the site and the associated organisation are created. Hence, having a web presence, like advertising, should be able to boost corporate image. This effect is crucial because the website may be related to branding, especially if it is a vehicle for sale.

To this end, websites are often customised, or *localised* for foreign markets, taking into account local language issues, business or social standards and aesthetic preferences. Localising a website is a complicated but necessary task. The idea of making versions of a site for different cultures implies a desire to show the consumers that the organisation is willing to accommodate their needs. According to recent research, users perceive a company more favourably (for example, more trustworthy, more likeable, etc) when they see a version of its website in their mother tongue, regardless of the user's English proficiency (Hayward & Tong, 2001).

Written text plays a crucial role on the web, as most websites (particularly corporate sites) are content-based. Too many companies have found themselves in trouble by entrusting their translation to someone in the company who has travelled the world and is "fluent" in 6 languages, or to people who happen to be bilingual despite having no localisation background. We've all had the experience of laughing at copy poorly translated into English. However, failing to gain market share because of linguistic issues is really not a laughing matter.

In any case, successful localisation involves a lot more than simply translating content. The manner in which people carry out tasks can differ from culture to culture. For example, approaches such as the 'shopping trolley' or 'shopping cart' metaphor may not transfer accurately to some cultures, which may dramatically reduce the usability of an e-commerce site, and therefore reducing revenue in those countries.

Having made large investments, companies should not allow their websites to be downgraded in their international versions.

Fortunately, there is a growing acknowledgement amongst international businesses that each of their foreign markets is best served with its own culturally-specific website. Furthermore, there is an important business case behind this acknowledgement since non-English speaking Internet users alone now represent over 63% of the world online population (Global Reach). The fact is even though many international businesses have had their English websites translated into the languages of their main foreign markets, they have found that these sites have not performed as successfully as their home versions. For a site to be well received and successful - today more than ever - it should address those intangible aspects that make a group of people a community and not only obvious, superficial items such as measurement units, currency, etc.



## But it is not that easy: why localisation efforts fail

Quite apart from the linguistic aspects, localising the content of a website is not easy. From a technical point of view, localising web content poses some of the largest challenges. Websites come in many shapes and forms, from a few pages of HTML created in basic text editors to vast scripted or database-driven sites. Internal company sites (intranets) are also becoming more popular for the internal dissemination of information in a structured manner. Timeliness, and up to the minute content are rapidly becoming the key discriminators of a company's website, and as the web is a global phenomenon, the speed at which this content is localised is also becoming an issue for many companies.

In addition to the linguistic and technical issues, website localisation also faces cultural issues. Culture, in terms of web localisation, refers to how people from a specific location view and react to images and messages in relation to their own patterns of acting, feeling and thinking, all of them often ingrained in people by late childhood (Hofstede, 1994). Any differences in these patterns are displayed in the choice of symbols, rituals and values of a culture. A culture influences the perceptions, thoughts and actions of all its members, and it is this common influence that defines them as a group (Thomas, 1996).

These various different sets of ideas and expectations that culture provides are all brought to bear when interacting with technology. Dialogue between human and computer is constrained not only by the design laws of the computer, but also by the user's understanding of the world and its norms. If the design of a computer system does not match the user's understanding of the task in hand then the interaction between the two will be sub-optimal. Products designed in one culture for use in another often fall into this category. This is generally because of two common errors in the localisation process:

### Designers do not necessarily know about other cultures

The first stumbling block most localisation projects encounter is the limits of human intuition about other people. Specifically, however much we believe we know about a group or an individual, as human beings we are extremely poor at anticipating their requirements. When considering the needs of users from another country, even well-intentioned designers may be unaware of their own biases and ignorance concerning the people of that culture. They are often unable to 'filter out' interface features which can handicap users from other cultures (Fernandes, 1995). Some projects attempt to circumvent these problems by enlisting a friend or colleague who has lived in the target culture and maybe speaks the language. Unless these individuals spent their time in that country working on markedly similar projects it is unlikely that their 'insights' will be any more accurate than those of anyone else. In reality, successful localisation begins with a recognition we do not necessarily know the requirements of other cultures when a project is begun. What is needed is a systematic approach to collecting information about the users of a product in other countries.



### Cosmetic changes are not enough

The second common mistake is to pay attention to superficial differences between cultures in the belief that this represents an adequate attempt at localisation. In order to improve the quality of what is essentially guesswork, designers tend to use guidelines which help them address the features which vary superficially across cultures. These guidelines cover such areas as the various formats for currencies and dates.

Guidelines often serve to give designers and management alike the mistaken impression that the website has been localised and effectively 'fireproofed' for cross-cultural usability problems. In fact, culture actually influences interaction with computers at levels significantly deeper and less observable than the use of particular calendars or currencies.

Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research shows that successful interaction depends on more than just using the correct language. Interaction is also dependent upon the culturally-embedded meaning of objects such as icons, and metaphors such as the desktop, or the shopping cart (Bourges-Waldegg & Scrivener, 1998; French & Smith, 2000). For example, whilst the US and the UK share a common language, a website which utilised the metaphor of the white pages (the US phone directory) to help users find individuals' contact details may not be appropriate for use in the UK. This is despite the fact that superficially, the site may not appear to be in need of localisation.

What is needed therefore, is a new definition of effective localisation and its scope.

### Extending the scope of localisation through the inclusion of HCI expertise

As shown earlier, website localisation efforts have traditionally been concerned mainly with translation and character encoding issues; however, this alone is not sufficient to meet the technology needs of users from other cultures.

In fact, there is a considerable amount of evidence detailing the difficulties and failures experienced by users of culturally inappropriate systems. The extent of human diversity is such that the mere translation of an interface from one language to another will not always be sufficient to meet the needs of another culture.

HCI approaches model systems from the user's perspective and therefore are well-placed to inform localisation requirements for a site if employed early enough in the design process. During the 1990's cross-cultural HCI research has expanded from issuing guidelines and importing models from the social sciences (e.g. Hall, 1979; Hofstede, 1991) to developing its own frameworks (Bourges-Waldegg & Scrivener 1998; French & Smith 2000). Papers with a global aspect regularly feature in all major HCI conference programmes.

However, despite this explosion of research interest, the number of designers using HCI support for cross-cultural interactive systems remains low. Additionally, a worrying number of misinterpreted theories have been imported piecemeal from other fields such as social sciences, linguistics and cognitive psychology. This is not uncommon in interface design where imported theories are often adopted and cited by designers

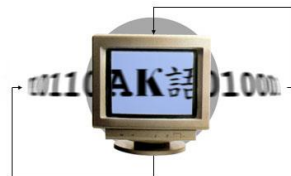


ignorant of the research background. These theories then gain credibility within the design community at the expense of other findings (Green et al, 1996).

There is a clear need for culturally sensitive technology, a need which is currently not being met. What is obvious is that designers should not be expected to add localisation to their skill-set. The interdisciplinary nature of localisation means that it does not lend itself to 'one-size-fits-all' solutions which can be learnt and applied in identical fashion to all projects. The background of each applicable theory and the subtleties of local culture and language must be understood fully.

Whether the product in question is software, a website or a mobile phone preparing the user interface for use in an international context calls for expertise from a variety of fields. Designers are required for their creative abilities. Equally, properly qualified linguists and translators are necessary not just to translate content, but also to ensure that the essential meaning of each message is communicated adequately.

However, successful interaction cannot be boiled down to a simple matter of aesthetic preferences and translation. This ignores behaviour on the part of the user: people all over the world have different, culturally-rooted responses to stimuli and act accordingly. For example, Chinese consumers prefer shopping at online stores that offer bargaining even when the price they achieve is greater than at other stores (Liang & Doong, 2000). HCI professionals utilise a range of methods, from cognitive models through to usability testing and user-participatory methods which determine the requirements of different cultures. These can be applied to make recommendations on the subsequent localisation of systems. If properly implemented at an early enough stage by professionals with the correct knowledge of localisation issues, these recommendations can significantly improve localisation, increase ROI and improve the relationship of a brand with its target group of consumers.



## The marketing case

In many ways, the choice of a brand over another is becoming more and more a political choice by consumers. They express a whole host of values when buying a product. Therefore that product must represent and address the consumer's concerns and beliefs. And this is where a simple literal translation can never be enough. Each market has to be scrutinised and culture-specific solutions found. Consumers only respect a brand that respects them. There is a lot of opportunity for brands that are willing to listen to their markets and are prepared to go the extra mile in the localisation process. What brands have to understand is that markets are there to be seduced, not patronised, and the only way to seduce them is to know how they think and feel, and act consequently.



From a marketing perspective, brands need to realise that being an international brand means that each section of their target market is as equally important as the home one. German or Polish website users believe that they are entitled to as much attention from a brand as their American or British counterparts, after all they are paying just as much money for the product. At the end of the day it is for the seller to make an effort in a transaction, not the buyer.

Generally speaking, the recipe for international success is first of all to convince people that the product is good and that it was produced with the consumer's needs in mind. Each country will need to have this explained from a slightly different angle, determined by the local culture's priorities.

Problems in this process occur when English-speaking, and especially American, businesses tend to confuse increasing Internet use worldwide with increasing Americanisation of other cultures. There seems to be the misperception that if a person in another country has access to the web, then they will already have been exposed to enough western influences to be able to use sites of Anglo-American origin. In fact, despite its history, there is nothing inherently American or even Westernising about Internet use, as evidenced by the fact that by 2007 the dominant language of the web will be Chinese (Global Reach).

All of the above means that an international campaign, or a multilingual website, cannot be researched and developed in English, and then sent for translation (the arrogant approach). As stated earlier, superficial approaches to localisation do not adequately meet the needs of users in different countries, and do not create the positive awareness of their brand that companies crave.

In order for localised sites to perform effectively, differences in culture must be reflected in the design of each. In order to achieve this, the localisation function has to be integrated at a much earlier stage of any planning or creative process. Every aspect should be discussed and studied before its development and then implemented. This represents a revolution in localisation as we know it - but a necessity at a time of increasing dependency on foreign markets.

In fact, a better-integrated localisation approach could mean significant savings on post-production adaptations via economies of scale and the pooling of assets and resources via new technologies, as well as greater branding consistency and therefore greater ROI. The reduced cost of localisation achieved in this way could, for instance, also allow entry in previously unviable markets.

## Conclusions

Products such as websites expose companies to global markets, but few companies pay adequate attention to the vast audience outside their own borders. Of those that do, most are only prepared to pay the absolute minimum for translated versions of their main site. Whilst superficially localised, these sites do not fulfil their intended functions as they may remain culturally unsuitable. Localisation must start from an in-depth knowledge of the local culture and requirements, and then address those requirements within the framework of existing local cultural structures. Cultural differences affect

interaction at levels significantly deeper than language. Addressing these differences requires the early attention of professionals with expertise in a variety of fields, specifically user-centred design and HCI, psychology and linguistics. Only this formal synthesis of expertise can guarantee the reaping of the enormous benefits that globalisation can offer to truly international businesses.



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Mario graduated in Simultaneous Interpreting at the University of Trieste (Italy). The interest for language and cross-cultural message delivery was instrumental in the choice of his dissertation on “The Adaptation of Advertising Texts in Switzerland”, and also in the decision to take an MA in Corporate Communication at the University of Venice. After a few years of free-lance interpreting and translating, he joined the advertising agency Euro RSCG Interaction.

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