



# Global Propaganda

## Web Site Localisation

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*In communication terms, the world is becoming a smaller place. With the advent of technology like the World Wide Web, the only real limitations companies have on selling to the world market are languages and cultural differences. Language, culture, customs and philosophies define the individual and the community. Those differences can be a huge barrier to business, and bridging the linguistic and cultural gap is an essential element of all successful business communication. Fortunately, world cultures vary along consistent, fundamental dimensions.*

*There are potentially huge untapped markets available and real opportunities exist to get a firm grip on new and emerging markets before the competition.*

*Internet users around the world have rightly come to expect that web sites will be available in their own languages, meeting their own cultural norms, with full functionality.*

*Web sites are created by companies to perform certain marketing and advertising functions.*

*Localising the content of a web site poses some of the largest technical, linguistic and cultural challenges, since a web site is technology-based and interactive, with text continually changing, and users are heavily influenced in their judgments about companies by their interactions with a company's web site.*

*This paper will try to introduce the audience to some basic concepts of web site localisation, as well as explain how localisers, translators, advertisers, copywriters and designers overcome numerous linguistic, cultural and technical problems in the process.*

This paper was first published in 2001 in the Proceedings of the *European Languages and the Implementation of Communication and Information Technologies (Elicit)* conference. University of Paisley. ISBN: 0-9541774-0-1



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## **1. Introduction**

Whether a company is an established giant with subsidiaries around the world, or a small company expanding for the first time into overseas markets, a well-coordinated international sales and marketing effort is critical for success. Localisation is an integral part of that effort.

A web site can serve as a company's premier marketing tool, a facilitator of direct sales, a technical support mechanism or for purposes of public relations. When users interact with a web site, awareness, 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 web site may be related to branding, especially if it is a vehicle for sale.

Translating and localising a web site is a complicated but necessary task. The idea of making versions of a site in different languages has, at its core, a desire to show the consumer that the organisation is willing to accommodate his or her needs – showing concern toward the customers. According to recent research, users perceive a company more favourably (for example, more trustworthy, more likeable, etc) when they see a version of the web site in their mother tongue, regardless of their English proficiency (Tong, 2001).

Written text plays a crucial role on the web, as most web sites (particularly corporate sites) are content-based. Language has significant branding and perceptual influences on user psychology. Too many companies have found themselves in trouble by entrusting its 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. Failing to gain market share because of linguistic issues is really not a laughing matter. Having made large investments, companies should not allow their web sites to be downgraded in their international versions.

But apart from the linguistic aspects, localising the content of a web site is not easy. From a technical point of view, localising the content of a web site poses some of the largest technical challenges. Web sites 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 company's web sites, and as the web is a global phenomenon, the speed at which this content is localised is also becoming an issue for many companies.

On top of the linguistic and technical issues, web site 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



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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.

Culture is often the most readily overlooked aspect of web site design. Too often, companies get to a standstill in the politics of “real estate”, artistic templates and brand messaging, and they do not consider how important a role culture plays in the very design of a web site.

## 1.1 Some definitions: localisation, internationalisation and transcreation

It is a good start to define the difference between some key terms common in the industry. These three terms are sometimes abbreviated to the first and last letters and an indication of how many letters there are in between.

- a. *Localisation or localisation (l10n)* is the process of adapting technical media products (generally developed for the US market) into a form where they are linguistically, functionally and culturally acceptable in countries outside the original target market. These media products take on a variety of different forms, e.g., software, help, printed and on-line documentation, web sites, e-mails, web-based applications, multimedia components (audio, video, graphics) and so on.
- b. *Internationalisation (i18n)* describes the process of following necessary rules during the initial development of a product. If product internationalisation is done properly, and at an early stage in the development process, the localisation effort (e.g., into Spanish) should result in what is essentially a Spanish product, as opposed to an US product translated into Spanish. Internationalisation and localisation ideally complement each other.
- c. *Transcreation* is the process of culturally and linguistically adapting marketing-oriented messages (as opposed to technical content) to the requirements of another market. The preservation of the meaning or message of a piece of text usually requires the re-writing of a phrase rather than a verbatim translation.

When applying the above definitions to web site design, if internationalisation and localisation have been truly successful, then a Spanish or German (or any other) Internet user will have access to a site created with his cultural and linguistic sensitivities in mind. The degree to which transcreation is carried out varies, and is generally dependent on each market's individual requirements, the client's budget and schedule restrictions.

## 1.2 Why localise? The use of the Internet around the world.

If a company markets or sells products or services in non-English speaking countries (or if it is planning to), it should have a clear web strategy that matches those objectives. For



maximum effectiveness, a site should be available in the languages with which international customers are most at ease - their own.

Who visits the World Wide Web? Many people think that because mainly computer literate individuals use the World Wide Web, promoting their business in English alone is sufficient. While this may have been true in the past, it is no longer the case. The number of Internet users in non-English speaking countries is growing exponentially. Global Reach, at <http://glreach.com/globstats/>, offers the latest estimated figures of the number of people online in each language zone (native speakers). They are classified by languages instead of by countries, since people speaking the same language form their own online community no matter what country they happen to live in.

## **2. Analysing and planning the localisation of a web site**

Web localisation can be both worthwhile and affordable, provided there is appropriate planning right from the start. A mistake in the initial planning of localisation can create more work in the long term.

Before a company starts thinking about the localisation itself, they should critically analyse the existing site, if there is one. Producing several versions based on the same design may cause problems if that original design is inadequate.

Areas such as technical complexity download times (especially considering international markets where Internet access is expensive), and the content layout need to be examined.

The amount of graphics used should be a balance; too cluttered and the content becomes obscured, too little and the site may appear under developed. Download times also need to be considered in terms of target audiences. Larger companies will most likely have faster access to the Internet, and therefore a higher tolerance of more graphics but the same speed will not necessarily be shared by a home user. Graphics content should be restrained, but designed to impress.

The technology used in a site should also be considered. Using dynamic components in a site will impress and interest people. Many web users are computer literate, and the target audience may expect a certain level of technical competence.

The content of a web site should be simple to navigate, useful, and most importantly current. Outdated information may cause a user browsing the pages to question the usefulness of the entire site.

### **2.1 What to localise**

It is often the case that not all the pages of a web site will need translating, as some may contain 'local' information of no interest to certain markets (e.g., job vacancies and local



events). This makes it important to decide which pages constitute the central core of a web site, and to stick to translating just those.

### **2.2 Keeping a site up-to-date**

It is a good idea to continually monitor the quality of a translated site. An important aspect of the planning process is identifying the parts of the site that will regularly change. It can be very frustrating for a user who knows that the information is available but who is unable to access it in his language. In this case any updates to a site should be closely followed by their translation.

### **2.3 The structure of a localised site**

Planning the structure of an entire site before translation begins can also be useful. This will simplify the work needed to maintain several languages at once. It is also important to decide how the language versions will co-exist.

The most common method of organising a multilingual site is to store each language at the same location. This helps the web co-ordinator maintain the site more easily, being able to synchronise any updates across all languages at once. Typically, such a site will have a link to each different language on its homepage, so a single web address can be used globally.

A variation on this is to store several languages on the same page, which can be useful for countries that have more than one national language. This may also simplify site co-ordination by reducing the number of pages.

A different approach is to store each language site in its own specific country. This makes maintenance a slower, more cumbersome procedure, but may speed up download times locally. Larger corporations, which may have a significant presence in each country and the resources to maintain several different sites, favour this.

Sometimes each site may be created independently, which can cause inconsistencies between the information provided in different regions.

## **3.0 The translation and the cultural adaptation of the design**

Each country, region, state or even province has individual, distinguishable language, humour, jargon, colloquialisms, slang, gestures, images, names, sounds, fashion, religion, values, symbols, animals, history, education, law, colour sense and sensitivity, political correctness, etiquette, etc. To simply 'translate' a text from one language into another without respecting and adapting these cultural and linguistic differences, would render its message ineffective to the targeted market.

The most important thing to bear in mind is that a good translation is rarely a literal translation. A translator needs some creative freedom in order to add local colour. This

helps to show an understanding of the countries a company provides services for, consequently building their visitor's trust and loyalty. There is a need to be country specific as well as language specific.

Bearing this in mind, it is worth considering whether there is a need to provide country specific content. If there is enough interest for the site in a particular country, then providing additional material may be a useful way of adding value to the localisation.

The linguistic quality of a translation is the most specialised and integral part of any localisation effort. It is essential that the translators are native speakers and are living in their native countries for the majority of the time. When people are not speaking/reading/writing their language frequently, they quickly lose touch with the ongoing changes in their native language. It is equally important that the translators are specialised in the field they work in. To translate, for instance, a technical text requires, besides a firm understanding of industry-standard terminology, an eye for detail, consistency in style and the ability to translate commands, terms, descriptions, etc, clearly and with the end-user in mind. Marketing content differs dramatically in both its style of writing and in the message it is trying to convey. The skills necessary for translating a marketing text, therefore, are different from the skills needed to translate a software product. Transcreation and copy writing are coming closer... the translators need to dissect the original text, analyse its message and the linguistic means by which that message is achieved. They also need to consider the respective market in terms of target audience, cultural do's and don'ts, linguistic background, and so on.

Companies should also be aware of language variations, such as the differences between Portuguese and Brazilian Portuguese, British, Australian, South African and American English or Spanish and Latin-American Spanish. Whilst Brazilian Portuguese is used by far more people than Portuguese, if a company intends to cater for both they should really provide localisations for both.

### **3.1 Essential Resources and Tools**

Tools are increasingly being used in the translation of digital documents. These are either aids to the translator, typically bilingual glossaries, or sometimes completely automated systems.

Bilingual glossaries are useful for helping the translator with technical terms. This is particularly useful for web sites where technical terms are used frequently and need to be consistent.

Automated systems tend to be used by large corporations with vast quantities of documents to translate, more than could be coped with by translators alone. The type of language used for this needs to follow strict grammatical rules, removing any ambiguity. After translation, a document will also need proof reading to ensure that no meaning has



been lost during the process. The low quality of these systems means they are of little use for web site localisation, and are rarely used.

### **3.2 Main aspects to consider when localising a site**

People from different countries are different and therefore users from around the world will use a web site differently. International usability is difficult to reach; nevertheless as usage grows on multiple countries, sites will die if they do not provide quality service to their international customers. A good way to overcome the problems of web site localisation is good planning and good understanding of what needs to be done.

- a. *Hard-coded Text.* If text is hard-coded within the site it cannot be translated. Whatever strings are hard-coded will have to remain in English.
- b. *Hard-coded Fonts.* Similar to text if fonts are hard coded, then they cannot be changed. If the fonts used do not support all of the characters used in the target language, then there will be major problems.
- c. *Foreign Characters.* Different languages use different character sets. It is essential that sites have been programmed to allow displaying them properly. A "meta" tag with a "charset" attribute sets the user's web browser to the correct encoding. The charset meta tag for western European languages is:  
<META HTTP-EQUIV="Content-Type" CONTENT="text/html;CHARSET=ISO 8859-1">. For non-Western languages, the charset needs to be changed, and if there is not a tag, the programmers need to add one. It is essential for non-Western European languages.
- d. *Cultural Issues and symbols.* As part of the web site design, it is necessary to avoid culture-dependent symbols that are not clear to an international audience. A classic example would be an American mailbox with a little flag to indicate that there is new mail. This symbol is used on many sites to indicate e-mail but people outside of North America don't necessarily recognise the mailbox. For a web site, a better symbol would be an envelope, which is universally understood. There are also many symbols that may have different meanings in different cultures. Avoid using graphics that represent holidays or seasons, such as Christmas trees, pumpkins, or snow. Also, be culturally sensitive when choosing sounds for use in a site. While some users may find it helpful to hear a beep when they make a mistake, users in Japan may find a beep embarrassing, in that it calls attention to their mistakes. If there are any doubts regarding the hidden meaning of some symbols, it is better to use words instead. As a general rule, the following should be avoided in any graphics used: Hand gestures or body parts; graphics with multiple meanings (e.g. a "pillar" to indicate a "column"); Religious symbols such as stars, crosses etc; Shapes that are tied to culture (e.g. stop signs, sports,



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mailboxes etc.); animals, mythological symbols, national emblems, colours, people (especially racial, cultural, or gender stereotypes).

- e. *Double-byte enablement.* If a site is going to go into Asian languages, it must be Double-byte Enabled in order to support the characters used. There are also significant cultural issues that must be addressed for a successful entry into the Asian market.
- f. *Locale-specific content.* The following list provides some of the items that would need to be changed during localisation. These items are often hard-coded but should, where possible, use the system settings for the user's environment.
  - Date formats (including calendar settings and day/month names)
  - Time formats (12-hour vs. 24-hour clock etc.)
  - Currency formats and other monetary-related information (taxes etc.)
  - Number formats (decimal separator, thousand separator etc.)
  - Fonts (names, sizes etc.)For fonts, it is best practice to use Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) whenever possible. CSS allow fonts to be changed for all the pages in one place, and there will be fewer tags within the text for the localisers to sift through. Other issues for consideration, which may not have formatting rules specified by the user's environment include:
  - Address formats (postal codes, provinces, states etc.)
  - Name formats (2 surnames in Spanish speaking countries, for instance)
  - Telephone number formats
  - Units of measure
  - Paper sizes
  - Use of colour for meaning (e.g. red = stop)
- g. *Consistency.* The translations used throughout the site must be consistent with the terminology used throughout all product components, i.e. marketing materials, software, help, documentation, etc.
- h. *Leveraging text.* When translations have been approved they should be stored and re-used in later components/versions/products. This decreases turn-around time, reduces the translation effort and increases consistency. The usage of Computer-Aided Translation (CAT) tools is recommended in this task.
- i. *Text embedded in graphics, video or animations.* Where possible, the use of text in graphics, video or animations is discouraged. Most localisable visuals consist of text on top of some sort of structured background. To localise any text in them, it is necessary to get access to the textual part of the visual. Localisable visuals should be handed off in a package that supports "layering" so that the text portion



of the visual is on a separate layer and easily accessible for translation. If text-embedded files are necessary, the designers should create a well-documented, layered source file with details of the fonts and colours used, keeping in mind that text within the graphic is probably longer for localised languages than for English so room for text to expand should be allowed.

- j. *Text embedded in scripts.* Html alone produces only static web sites. Dynamic web pages require “scripting” and other additions to the html code. Scripting is programming that enables interactivity and “live” access to programs on servers, such as databases. Scripts may contain text to translate. Some scripting appears within HTML files, for example, JavaScript. However, other scripts are separate files in various programming languages: Java Server Pages (.JSP), Active Server Pages (.ASP), Cold Fusion Markup Language (.CFM), Perl (.PL), Java (.java) or combinations of the previous. The translator can open nearly all script files in a text editor, such as Notepad or WordPad; but finding the text to translate may be a challenge – like HTML, the text is usually outside brackets. Programmers should extract the text from these files or teach the translators how to handle them.
- k. *Sort order.* Sort order is not the same for all languages, particularly for languages that do not use the Western alphabet. In Swedish, for example, some extended characters (e.g. å) get sorted after the letter Z. In many Asian cultures, characters are comprised by a prescribed tradition of brushstrokes and characters are sorted by the brush stroke order. Also, after localisation, the first letter of the word might change, changing its position in the sort order list. To build an internationalised Web site, it is necessary to either find a way to automatically sort the items (this can be a very difficult task) or ensure that the localisers can change the sort order of the list while they are localising the code. The optimal method for the end user is to allow the translator to personally sort the list.
- l. *Quality assurance.* A linguist must check the translated site after it has been built. If the site is interactive, all functionality should be tested.

## 4.0 Conclusions

Serving the world really means serving many local markets - each differently. To do this well, companies need a localisation framework that balances corporate standardisation against market specialisation.

Having a web presence by itself may not automatically guarantee a favourable corporate image. Like advertising in other media, the quality of the message itself is equally important. The world wide web enables interactive communication between a company and its clients. The quality and experience of the interaction may be as important for the



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forming of attitudes as the content itself. Experiences with a web site will be only one of various sources of information that consumers use to form attitudes about a company (Javalgi et al., 1994). However, it is worthwhile to spend more effort in enhancing the usability of a company web site, and in particular providing multilingual versions, for the sake of better web performance and attitudes towards the company – and, hopefully, eventually more sales.

It is one of the great illusions of the past 20 years that advertising can be, somehow, culturally neutral (Anhold, 2000) – and that the same applies to all aspects of marketing communications, including web site design.

International marketing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not about ignoring or overriding cultural difference, but about understanding, accommodating and harnessing it in the service of global brand building.

International brand building is no longer a choice, it is a necessity. And culture is not the problem: it is the solution. Multicultural teams can far more than render communications suitable for overseas market use – they are more creative than monocultural teams.

One of the things that make localisation so difficult is that it often deals with very mundane problems, problems that seem like they should be easy to solve. Running a site in multiple languages is easier said than done.

In order to localise a web site, some cultural relativism is necessary: it is difficult to establish absolute criteria for what is noble and what is disgusting. There is no escaping bias; all people develop cultural values based on their environment and early training as children. Not everyone in a society fits the cultural pattern precisely, but there is enough statistical regularity to identify trends and tendencies. These trends and tendencies should not be treated as defective or used to create negative stereotypes but recognized as different patterns of values and thought. In a multi-cultural world, it is necessary to cooperate to achieve practical goals without requiring everyone to think, act, and believe identically.

This review of cultural dimensions raises many issues about design, especially for the web. We need to make it feasible to develop multiple versions of web sites in a cost-effective manner, perhaps through templates or through specific versioning tools. As the web continues to develop globally, answering these questions, and exploring, then exploiting, these dimensions of culture, will become a necessity and not an option for successful web site localisation.

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