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Benefits of Website Localization

By Neil Payne

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Benefits of Website Localization

Maximising profit today involves reaching beyond national markets. Accessing an international customer base is vital if a business wants to expand and participate in international trade.

'Localization' relates to the act of modifying a product to make it both usable and suitable to a target market. Website localization therefore refers to the process of taking an English, western-orientated, website and moulding it to conform to a foreign audience.

The World Wide Web, as its name suggests, is a means by which businesses can reach an international audience. Companies are now recognising that a key step in successfully approaching and selling to international customers is through website localization.

Website localization brings with it numerous benefits. The three main benefits of localization are:

Website localization crosses language barriers

32% of internet users around the world are non-native English speakers. With PC ownership and access to the internet most rapidly increasing outside of North America and Europe, this figure will increase even more. Website localization breaks linguistic barriers and opens doors to other continents.

Companies are now waking up to the fact that English is no longer 'the' international language but one of many including French, Spanish, Arabic and Chinese. With the number of companies now realising the benefits of website localization, there are more pages in foreign languages than ever before. This means if your company's site has not undergone the localization process yet, it will be playing catch up in the future.

Website localization builds credibility

Benefits of Website Localization

If your company only has a site in English and your competitor in all major languages, which one will gain more credibility? Localization of your website demonstrates that you are a truly international player. In addition, through localization it shows that you understand, value and have respect for that particular country or region.

Website localization increases revenue

Billions of dollars, pounds and francs in potential revenue are lost each year due to lack of investment in website localization. Most internet users will naturally feel more comfortable and understand a company better if their information, products or services are presented in their native language. By undergoing the website localization process you access potentially millions of new customers.

It is clear that website localization is a must for any truly international business. In addition to the technical and programming elements of website localization many cultural factors must be borne in mind.

For example, has language been translated properly and cultural variations in terminology, phrases, metaphors and sayings been taken into consideration? Have symbols, graphics, pictures, colours and general layout been viewed for their cultural applicability?

Website localization is a huge investment and should not be viewed as a straightforward process. When localizing your site, ensure you get the expertise of both a website designer and a cross cultural communications consultancy to ensure your site has maximum impact on the target audience.

Neil Payne is Director of London based cross cultural communications consultancy, Kwintessential.
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Culture and Website Localization

By Neil Payne

With the rise in ownership of computers and internet usage growing daily, the internet is fast becoming the primary port of call for information, shopping and services. In addition, those computer and internet users are increasingly from non-English speaking countries. At the end of 2002, it was estimated that 32% of internet users were non-native English speakers. This figure is constantly rising. In response, businesses have quickly become aware of the benefits of website localization.

Website localization is the process of modifying an existing website to make it accessible, usable and culturally suitable to a target audience. Website localization is a multi-layered process needing both programming expertise and linguistic/cultural knowledge. If either is missing, the chances are that a localization project will encounter problems.

In the majority of cases it is the lack of linguistic and cultural input that lets a website localization project down. In order to give an insight into the impact culture has on website localization the following

Benefits of Website Localization

examples depict areas in which a solid understanding of the target culture is necessary.

Language in Website Localization

Translating a website from English into another language is not as simple as it may appear. There are numerous factors that have to be taken into consideration when translating a websites' content.

Do all the words, phrases, sayings and metaphors translate directly to the target language? Would it be wise to translate the phrase "everyman for himself" in text describing a company or product if this is going to be read by a highly collectivist culture? Does the content of your website use humour and if so will the target culture appreciate or even understand it? Native alternatives should always be sought and used in any website localization.

When translating into another language carefully consider the variants. If it is to be an Arabic website then is aimed at Tunisians or Iraqis, Egyptians or Yemenis? If you are targeting all Arabic speakers then ensure Modern Standard Arabic has been employed by your translator.

One must analyse the style of the language and the target audience. If the audience is foreign business personnel, the vocabulary, grammar and punctuation must reflect this. If the audience is informal or youth orientated then a more relaxed language must used. Just as we in the UK would identify the difference between a site using `posh English' and `street English', other cultures will have the same perceptions of language. Using the wrong language for the wrong reader in your localization project will lead to a misunderstanding of the site or company.

It is essential to assess what information is necessary to carry over into the new site. Do not assume that all information on the English site is automatically transferred over. One must evaluate the target culture and society. Is it a culture that relies on information rich writing to fully understand a concept or product or is a culture that relies more on images or one that needs little text to grasp ideas and

concepts? If your English site employs a lot of technical language then consider how best to transfer these concepts without the use of language.

Pictures in Website Localization

Images carry many subtle cultural messages within them. These can speak volumes about your company or product. Pictures or images may have certain negative connotations that may repel viewers. This is now an area that thankfully is receiving attention in website localization.

For example, if a travel site in a Muslim populated country used pictures of scantily clad women in bikinis, disco dancing and beer drinking, the chances are that they would not be very successful.

When including pictures of personnel it is wise to tailor these to what the target audience will look positively upon. A picture of the Director behind a desk in an office will be fine for a seniority respecting society, but for an egalitarian society it is better to show the Director mixing with staff.

Benefits of Website Localization

It is through pictures that websites can either relate to an audience or repel them.

Symbols in Website Localization

As with pictures, symbols can cause problems in localization. Icons using fingers such as an OK sign or V-sign may mean different things to different cultures. Our Western symbols do not always mean the same abroad. An oft cited example is the representation of the house referring to a home page, or a letterbox to mail. The use of animals in logos can cause embarrassment and further problems. For example, pigs are considered unclean in the Middle East and cows as holy in India.

Colours in Website Localization

Colours are also loaded with cultural meanings that need to be analysed in website localization. Choosing the wrong colour for your logo or background will not always have disastrous consequences, but avoiding them is always advisable.

For example, in Japan white is commonly associated with mourning. In China red is auspicious. In Africa certain colours represent different tribes.

Navigation in Website Localization

It is even the most taken for granted aspects of website layout that must be analysed properly for a successful localization project. In the West we assume that how we present websites is how it naturally should be done. This is far from the truth.

A common problem experienced in localization is the effect on layout through translation. Foreign scripts can make your pages need more room or less room depending on the target language in the localization. Not all languages read from left to right. Arabic is from right to left and both Japanese and Chinese are from top to bottom.

Access to certain pages is also a factor that can be considered as relevant. Highly hierarchical cultures may view a site positively if it is 'member only' access, whereas an egalitarian culture may find it disagreeable.

Examining your written content in any localization process is critical to its success. This is not only important for proper transfer of aspects such as dates, currencies, and units of measurement but for the presenting the correct image.

For example, will the site focus on a product or a company? Both bring with them certain considerations dependent on the target culture. If a company is marketing itself in a culture that respects seniority and hierarchy, readers will want to see information on senior members. Along with their titles and rank they will also want to evaluate them through information on their professional qualifications, experience and contacts. These areas in the UK may generally be avoided as in our culture it is bordering on self-indulgence and boasting.

Conclusion

Culture affects everything we do, say, read, hear and think and even websites cannot escape the influence of culture.

The impact of culture on website localization is huge. The above few examples are literally the tip of the iceberg. The number of variables that have to be taken into consideration requires the expertise of both a website designer along with a cross cultural communications consultant. In tandem they can identify the issues that will impact on the successful localization of a site.

At a time where the internet is entering more and more houses it is crucial that companies involved in the internationalization of their business consider website localization and take care to use effective cross cultural analysis.

Neil Payne is Director of London based cross cultural communications consultancy Kwintessential.

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