

What Is Your Asia Strategy For The Global Customer Base?

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By Deepak Dutta

Something new happened in mid-2006 - five out of the top ten websites listed by Alexa (based on traffic for the previous three months) were Asian. Four of those were Chinese.

This is hardly surprising, given roughly half the world's population lives on the planet's largest continent. By percentage, however, they remain a relatively new force, one whose online presence will only continue to grow as more people gain Web access.

One interesting side note is that most of the Chinese sites also are available in English; some have even enabled phonetic search entries using English letters rather than Chinese characters. This could be recognition of English as the lingua franca of the Internet - or perhaps those webmasters are simply taking the lead in website internationalization.

While the dominance of Internet English has encouraged millions to learn or enhance their knowledge of it, anyone truly seeking a global customer base must find a way to provide their sites - whatever the original language - in at least two and perhaps five of the most common languages.

Today that is largely done with machine translation, which is far from perfect and can lead to serious misunderstandings. But the vast majority of netpreneurs are small shops without the resources to hire human translators; without a multilingual site, however, they are leaving money on the table and millions of potential customers in the dark.

According to various industry sources:

· Web users are four times more likely to purchase from a site that communicates in the customer's language (

<http://www.idc.com>

)

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- More than 100 million people access the Internet in a language other than English
- More than half of all Web users speak a native language other than English (

<http://www.gltreach.com>

)

- Visitors stay twice as long if a website is in their own language (Forrester Research)

While there are a lot of claims made for the accuracy and efficiency of machine translation, most experts agree the current state-of-the-art - at least, for public use on websites at affordable rates - is about 70 percent. That means nearly one-third of everything on a website will be mistranslated, with a fairly predictable result.

Which is not to say webmasters should completely reject machine translation. If an accurate human translation is beyond the budget, finding and applying the best machine translation available still puts that site well ahead of one that is available only in a single language.

For one thing, someone seeing it in his or her native language can probably figure out most of what is intended; perhaps more important, it demonstrates the owner of that site cares enough to make the

effort. And appreciation for that could well translate into customers and subscribers who otherwise might never have seen the site, much less stayed.

Webmasters should not assume that a human translation, no matter how expensive, is going to be a perfect solution, either. Many companies offering these services are based in countries where labor is cheap and the translator almost certainly is not fully fluent in both languages involved.

Which is not to say that person does not, in fact, have a good command of the non-native language in question, just that it requires years of reading, writing and interacting with native speakers to fully understand the intricacies of any language.

This is perhaps most obvious in observing the difficulties natives from different Spanish-speaking nations often have in understanding each other. For that matter, the same can be said of those who speak English as their native tongue, but with cultural, national or regional differences. Americans from the Deep South and from the New York Bronx have been known to stare at each other in complete lack of understanding as local slang and accents make the other's English practically a foreign language.

The obvious source for translation services - human and machine - is the search engine. What a search engine will not provide, however, is any indication of how accurate either service may be. The only proof there will be to request a sample translation - then take it to someone who is fluent in that language - and ask for a list of other sites using their service (then e-mail those webmasters for feedback).

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With the rise of the global Internet, the world has truly become decidedly smaller in little more than a decade, to a far greater extent than the previous changes brought on by aircraft, radio and television. And due to the dominance of English-speaking nations in those areas - as well as movies and the Internet itself - there has been a tendency, even among those who pride themselves on being at least bilingual, to assume everyone online understands English. And, more often than not, American colloquial English.

While that is truer today than at any other time in history - more true than with any previous language in history - those truly seeking to reach the world with their message or product need to take a wider view. In many cases, perhaps most, that does not mean providing for a host of translations; two or even three carefully chosen languages, may be enough to reach more than 90 percent of the target audience. Each webmaster or site owner will need to make that judgment.

Nor does this apply only to the majority of sites now displayed only in English. It also is true for those written in Chinese, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Swahili, French, Italian, German - or Outback Aussie.

As the Internet continues to expand into more and more homes and businesses around the world, the need for multi-lingual websites will become more and more prominent. And the opportunities for companies providing solid translation services - and for individuals with true multi-lingual fluency - will grow along with it.

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in more than 600 US cities and 60 countries.

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By Oliver Turner

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