

Are you ready to localize your website into additional languages?

More importantly, is your website ready?

Designing Your Website with Localization in Mind

An Overview of Best Practices

Strategy | Content | Technology



Website localization is a complex and multi-layered process. When not planned properly, localization could turn into a very costly and time consuming effort. The more you do to prepare yourself for website localization, the easier the process will be.

The following white paper outlines web localization best practices and is organized around five major areas: False Assumptions about Website Localization, Localization Strategy, Technical Preparation, Content and User Experience.

False Assumptions

Before beginning a discussion on localization best practices, it is worth mentioning a few of the common assumptions made about website localization:

“It’s only translation, it should be easy.”

Surprisingly, many companies without localization knowledge will assume that their website can simply be translated into foreign languages. Unfortunately, website localization requires much more than just translating the text. Text is only a part of user experience; date/time, input/output, images, colors, layout, fonts, validation and functionality makes the experience complete. You can have an excellent translation, but if the site is not localized properly customer satisfaction will suffer.

“Our distributors in the respective countries will take care of the local websites.”

Leaving the responsibility of developing your website to your distributors is risky. It may result in an inconsistent brand image which will lead to customer confusion.

“Our German employee can translate the website.”

Being able to write, doesn’t make a writer. Being a native speaker doesn’t make a translator. Professional translators have years of experience in translation and often obtain higher education in linguistics. Bilingual and in country employees are great resources for reviewing translated content and providing insider feedback to linguists, but shouldn’t be considered for providing content translations.

“We can just add Google Translate to our website and have it available in 30 languages.”

Machine translation tools such as Google Translate or Babylon may be useful for a personal blog, but not for a commercial website. Your website is the public image of your business; you want to make sure that its content is translated properly. Machine translation is far from being an acceptable replacement to human translation. Give machine translation a quick try and see it yourself:

The English sentence: “Shipping costs will be noted per item during the checkout process or you may estimate shipping costs from the cart before checkout.”

Translated by Google Translate into Chinese as: “运费会注意到每件在结帐过程中或您可能会估计航运结帐前车的费用。”

When you translate the sentence back to English with Google Translate it reads: “Freight will notice that each piece in the checkout process or you may estimate the cost of shipping the vehicle in front checkout.”

Excuse me, what?

Strategy

Before you initiate the localization process, it is good practice to outline the core strategies and goals for your website. The initial information can be broad but as you continue developing your site you should keep narrowing down the information until you have a clear idea of your localization strategy.

Define the budget - If budget is a big concern you may want to consider a partial translation of your website. Defining the importance of pages ahead of time, will help you stay within your budget and plan the process more effectively.

Define the audience - Who are your visitors? What is their educational level? Collecting this information will help translators develop customized content.

Decide how you will handle partially translated or non-translated pages - Will you notify the users about these sections? If you decide to leave some of your content in English, as a courtesy to users, you may want to mark the links that lead to non-translated pages with an “*English Only*” icon.

Define a support strategy for non-English speakers - If the customer support you provide in foreign languages is limited you can reduce customer questions by providing detailed information about your product or service in different languages.

Estimate the frequency of change and assess maintenance requirements - Knowing the frequency of change to the pages on your site will help you better maintain your budget.

Technical Preparation

Developing localized websites requires a great deal of localization engineering knowledge. Create a localization friendly website by following the best practices set out below. These practices may differ depending on the structure, complexity and backend design of your website.

Use Unicode when developing your site - An internationalized application uses Unicode for all handling of strings and text. This will prevent most occurrences of garbled text when translated.

Separate code from translatable text – All translatable text should be externalized and separated from the code to make the translation process easier.

Plan for text expansion - Leave enough space within your design to allow for text expansion. Typically you can expect the text to expand 20 to 30 percent when translating into foreign languages. If possible, use dynamically resizing textboxes.

Externalize styles - Different languages will require the use of different fonts and styles. All styles should be defined in style sheets to avoid tag level modification during localization.

Minimize text that is built into graphics - Images are costly to localize. If possible, avoid images that contain embedded text. If not, make sure that the text is isolated into separate layers; this will make localization easier.

Content

Develop your English content in a localization friendly manner - Avoid slogans and culturally specific examples that may be hard to understand and translate to another languages. By keeping things simple you will be rewarded later with lower costs and consistent translations.

Define a style guide to standardize your content - Developing a style guide from the beginning will ensure consistency in translation across multiple languages (e.g. do you want to use a formal or informal voice?)

Develop SEO strategy - Your localization vendor will help you with the localized keywords, however, outlining the target words for each page during the optimization of English content will help your localization vendor to develop a more efficient keyword strategy.

Keep the terminology consistent - Developing a glossary may seem time consuming, but it will ensure consistent translation of terms and brands.

Verify 1-800 numbers - If your localized pages contain toll-free 1-800 numbers, make sure that these numbers are accessible from the target regions. If not, provide alternate numbers.

Localize multimedia - There are various options for localizing audio and video; from doing voice-over recordings to inserting localized subtitles.

User Experience

Maintain global branding - Even though you may choose to customize your localized websites, it is essential to keep a similar look-and-feel across regions. Defining standards for images, colors, tone, and logos will help maintain a consistent global image.

Be careful about culturally sensitive images - An image can create opposite emotions in different parts of the world. We recommend evaluating your images carefully and even customizing them for different regions.

Beware of privacy laws - Remember that there are legal differences between countries. For example, in some countries you don't need to inform your web visitors about collecting their data while in other countries this act may be strictly forbidden.

Implement language selection options - You will need to decide how to present the localized website to users. The best practice is to automatically set the language on landing by detecting the users' language settings. An easily identifiable language selection box should also be present on the page to give them the ability to change the language.

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