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The Case for Globalization: Reasons for a multilingual web presence

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Introduction

As online productivity tools, e-commerce applications, web services and other tools become ever more ubiquitous, the need for businesses and organizations to address the fact that the Internet is indeed a global medium, becomes increasingly crucial. Through the early years of Internet popularization, many North American companies were blissfully unaware of the fact that only 5% of the world population considers English its mother tongue. With the recent downturn and continued moroseness in the local markets, gaining access to new foreign markets is considered a good diversification practice. The issue of globalizing one's web presence has thus become an important strategic decision for many companies in their efforts to leverage their products and services in more markets.

The need for globalization

There are many good reasons to consider and then implement a globalized Internet presence for one's organization. Aside from the obvious facts, that anything on the web can be seen by anyone anywhere in the world and that users on the web are becoming progressively more international and multilingual, there are also more immediate business reasons that may sway a company to localize its sites.

English may currently still be the language of choice for the majority of people connected to the online world, but it will not be long before non-English web content is more preponderant. This is simply due to the fact that people prefer interacting and transacting in their own language. Especially when it comes to completing a commercial transaction, it is extremely important to give the customer as much comfort as possible and communicate to her/him as clearly as possible what is being purchased.

Even though there is a trend towards unified markets and removing trade barriers between jurisdictions, the reality still is that as a company you have to address your customers with a customized message and you cannot expect that one solution will fit all. Customers will feel more comfortable when content, services and processes are tailored to their personal needs, their market and their cultural environment.

Companies can now easily reach new markets thanks to the omnipresence of the Internet and the continued improvement of access is still contributing to growth in that area. A company's ability to address its target markets in a customized fashion becomes a competitive advantage. Furthermore, taking into account that online customers are three times more likely to complete a purchase when addressed in their own language, localization of websites becomes indispensable.

Certain cultures and societies may historically be more in tune with cross border business and multilingual trade (typically smaller countries that are not self-sufficient have been good at this), an imperialistic approach to doing business may often rub foreign prospects the wrong way. Internet strategies nowadays should therefore always be designed with all target markets in mind. It is sensible to plan towards a truly global web presence even if the initial launch may not yet be comprehensive in terms of languages. The earlier a global web strategy is adopted, the easier it will be to create local sites that will facilitate the entry into new markets. The complexity of multilingual publishing may be a daunting enterprise for many small and medium sized enterprises and the cost may be a prohibitive entry barrier. However, with the sensible use of the available technologies and tools as well as the introduction of certain publishing processes, creating and maintaining high quality multilingual sites may be easier than expected.

Concept

The current best practice for the globalization of web applications and web sites is central management of

all efforts contributing to the multilingual and multi-market online presences and local execution of many of the actual hands-on tasks. Central management ensures that processes and quality are upheld through the entire organization whereas localization efforts performed in the markets ensure that content and communication is as accurate as possible for the respective locales. Technology tools such as content management systems, translation memory applications, workflow applications and project management tools support both the centralized and the hands-on tasks.

As the proportion of English speakers dwindles and the number of sites that an organization adapts to local needs increases, it becomes important to effectively manage, coordinate and synchronize all activities, hence the organization through a central "globalization manager". While it is possible to also perform the localization tasks, i.e. translation, at the central location, they are normally of higher quality when someone who has intimate knowledge of the local conditions does them.

A company or an organization that has a virtual and/or a physical presence in several linguistic markets and that does frequent updates to its online copy or other content (e.g. product data) will likely realize a quick ROI through the implementation of such a globalized system.

Business benefits

Even though we claim that the risks of foregoing web globalization are too important to ignore, a company needs to understand on a practical level how such a new endeavour will benefit its bottom line before it makes the commitment to globalize its websites. The following is a number measurable benefits that may make the case for a globalization initiative.

Through the centralized management of all online activities an organization gains control over its worldwide brand. Design guidelines and corporate ID can be enforced more effectively and will ensure that the organization's image is presented consistently everywhere. Of course, it is important to have design guidelines that are flexible enough to allow for local details and idiosyncrasies.

A well-managed Internet presence that is in sync with the markets that a company serves will help increase global market share. Personalized (i.e. localized) web experiences will help serve up more accurately what web users may be looking for on a company's site and greatly enhance loyalty to the brand. This improved communication will also help the company qualify web leads with greater precision. Not only can the website serve as an e-commerce outlet but it can also be utilized for such tasks as customer service or even as an internal (intranet) tool for the company's worldwide employees.

In terms of immediate windfall there are reduced translation costs that are a result of the corporate translation memory. Given the fact that much corporate literature is repetitive, it is sensible to create a terminology database for an organization that can then be used by any translator. Translators can download the corporate vocabulary and then match source text against target language, which will both reduce the number of words that need to be translated and accelerate the actual process. An added benefit of the translation memory is that it acts as a corporate style guide. The quicker translation cumulates in faster time-to-market and increased market opportunity by simultaneously reducing entry costs.

It is important to keep in mind that website localization may be more than just adapting online content. To truly support a globalized web presence it will not be sufficient to merely install the proper technology tools but there may be other expenses such as marketing collateral, and resources for customer support.

Terminology

Globalization: The process of managing and maintaining up-to-date content and services on all your company's website(s), regardless of the market they may address or language they may be published in.

Localization: The process of adapting the content and services on your website(s) to the specific local circumstances, e.g. translation of language, adaptation of cultural elements or commercial processes.

Internationalization: The design and development of computer code that completely separates logic and data from the presentation layer, i.e. the development of applications that will work in any language. This means that non-western and right-to-left characters should be supported.

Locale: In globalized applications all content is assigned to specific locale(s), i.e. it is assigned both a language and a region (or multiple regions).

Technology

The two main technology elements in a globalization solution are a content management system (CMS) and a translator's workbench with translation memory.

The CMS is the tool responsible for monitoring and publishing content on an organization's website(s). It allows organizations to publish online content more quickly and in higher quality while establishing or maintaining the publishing workflow that is necessary to ensure the accuracy of the content. One of the main reasons for accelerated publication is the fact that technical resources are no longer necessary to publish online. Through the use of a CMS manipulation of code (such as HTML) is no longer necessary and non-technical staff such as content contributors and editors can handle the publishing.

A translator's workbench is a desktop client that translators use to support their translation projects. When a translator translates a text for Company XYZ he or she interfaces with the company's server in order to download the company's terminology from its translation memory. The tool then matches any content from the new source text against the translation memory and can thus sometimes pre-translate a large percentage of the new text. The translator still has to translate and clean up the text but his/her task is greatly assisted and accelerated by the tool.

Many readers may be aware of the automatic translation engines that are available on the Internet. While the text output of these tools may be good enough to get the gist of a foreign language text they could never be used in a professional context. We therefore recommend not to use them on any of your websites.

One aspect that also needs consideration is the technology at the user's end. Keep in mind that users in other countries may not have the ease of access that we are accustomed to in North America. This may translate into lower bandwidth and older browsers, which should in turn should be factors that are contemplated when planning and building your applications.

Processes and commitment

One of the most important things to remember with a multilingual web presence is the commitment to keep all content across all languages as up-to-date and accurate as possible over time so that communications with all users is consistent. This means that going forward an organization will have to support the globalization processes with adequate resources.

The following are some approaches to the translation strategy for a globalized site:

- Concurrent publication of all languages >> this is a slow process and it can be very difficult to manage, but if you can handle the complexity of it all, your site will be truly 100% multilingual.
- Just-in-time translation >> this is a faster and more pragmatic approach. Texts and other contents are adapted when needed and published as they become available. This may lead to asynchronous communication in the different languages but it will still meet the most pressing demands.

For a company that is only starting to publish in multiple languages it will be important to approach the project with a phased methodology, i.e. it will probably make more sense to start with one or two foreign

languages before committing to covering all languages. This will give the organization time to understand the intricacies of launching and maintaining foreign language content.

However, globalization is not merely a question of translation, as some content from a parent site may not be appropriate for sites in foreign markets and cultures. Good localization will also include original copy for the regions that you are serving. This will also include website elements such as colors and iconography, which may be interpreted distinctly in your foreign markets.

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