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Businesses getting worldly on the Web

By DENISE DEVEAU
From Thursday's Globe and Mail

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The business of globalizing Web sites for e-commerce is becoming an art and a science unto itself — and a profitable one at that for some entrepreneurial-minded Canadian businesses.

"A year ago, that kind of work accounted for 20 per cent of our business. I'd say it's up to about 50 to 60 per cent now," says Ian Chalmers, president of Pivot Design Communications in Toronto.

In addition to design services, in recent months the company has gained considerable expertise in all the elements that make Web globalization work — from focus group research and URL registration to database conversion and programming support.

Philipp Gysling is director of Toronto-based Mesh Innovations Inc., a consulting service specializing in Internet business globalization. It's a career that he practised in Europe for several years (he is fluent in four languages) where multilingual Web development has been a part of everyday business for some time. Gysling opened Mesh 1½ years ago when he saw that there were few, if any, businesses that could do the same in Canada.

"Technical and translation work is one thing," Gysling says. "But a large part of multilingual work requires looking at publishing, content and workflow processes."

The logistics can be staggering. They include getting a handle on how to manage processes centrally and executing them locally, establishing approval and update processes, source texts, authoring tools and code, regional legal issues and terminology, among others. That's in addition to dealing with the cost and implementation of basic translation engines and content management tools.

Tracy Phillips, director of corporate marketing communications for Unitron Hearing in Kitchener, Ont., a developer of digital hearing solutions for global markets, says the groundwork is critical before one can even contemplate the software needs. She found that out a few months back when the company began working on expanding its on-line presence.

"You have to understand and work through the process before you put any investment into your system itself. A lot of needs are database and code driven, and many in-house Web teams are not equipped for that. And there weren't a lot of our current suppliers who could help us out in that area."

She estimates that since the development of their English site, globalization planning services have added about 20 per cent to their Web budget — not including the \$50,000 minimum that will be required for content management tools. "The ROI will come in our ability to roll-out new sites as we expand into more languages."

Mr. Chalmers says that businesses such as Unitron come to them knowing they need to look beyond the surface of multilingual needs. On top of all the translation, process, database and code decisions, there are countless aesthetic and cultural considerations that must also be addressed, such as overall design elements, navigation tools, visual images and much more.

"You have to treat your markets distinctively," he says. "There are even nuances in scripting and voice when adapting for a British Web site that are often

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From the design perspective the permutations are endless. Colours, icons, visual cues, typefaces, imagery and payment systems can change from country to country. White can signify purity in North America but mean death in other countries. Red can mean anything from aristocracy to anger or danger.

Even something as basic as navigation buttons must be carefully considered and designed to accommodate space and alphabet requirements. For example, German script is notoriously long and navigation commands often will not fit into an existing design.

Symbols such as the owl for wisdom in Western culture can represent stupidity in some eastern regions. The ubiquitous mailbox on a North American site has absolutely no relevance to any other country.

And humour? We all know that never translates well.

Even the smallest of mistakes in globalization can add up to big costs and potential losses — whether it's redesign fees, damage control, or simply losing out because another firm made doing business on the Web that much easier.

And it's becoming increasingly evident in the world of e-commerce that capturing bigger market means having to cater to a global audience.

Mark Fox, CEO of Novator Systems Ltd. in Toronto, a developer of e-commerce programs, estimates that companies could easily be missing out on a potential 20 per cent of their sales by not offering multilanguage support for customers. "Even in North America you are leaving out a large part of your market by not speaking their language."

"Studies have shown that users are three times more likely to buy when addressed in their language," adds Gysling.

Looking at the numbers, that could translate into significant gains over the long term for e-commerce players.

According to a recent retail report from Forrester Research, consumer e-commerce spending will increase at a 38-per-cent compound annual growth rate by 2008, with U.S. sales growing at a 19-per-cent pace.

In tandem with the potential sales growth numbers is a significant shift in Internet usage profiles. A recent Legal Media Group newsletter reports that, according to the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, the number of non-English speaking Internet users is fast reaching 50 per cent, with so many people in China, Japan and parts of the Middle East unable to read the Latin alphabet. It also estimates that Chinese users could make up half of Internet traffic in the next five years.

BMO Financial Group expanded to include the Asian market for its banking and investor services in February, 2001, in addition to French and English. (CIBC also offers Chinese language on-line services). "The Chinese market represents a high growth area, which is why we put our resources there," says Michael Edmonds, senior media and public affairs adviser.

He adds that any movement in making language more intuitive for transacting on-line, whether English or otherwise, delivers proven results. He reports that recent changes to all the bmo.com sites — including a simplified Chinese character option for mainland Chinese visitors (in addition to traditional Chinese characters) — almost immediately increased transaction rates by 20 per cent.

"If you can't support the order process [for global markets], it directly affects your bottom line," concompany's Karel Vredenburg, UCD (User-Centred Design) program director and corporate team lead for IBM Canada Ltd. in Markham. "It's a problem that a lot of companies are not addressing appropriately."

"If you don't feel comfortable in English, you won't deal with the complexities of order entry, buying, shipping, handling, taxes and warranties," says Gysling. "And it's not just a matter of simple translation and adaptation. North American companies assume too much."

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