

Multilingual SEO: the Multi-Market Advantage

Orad Elkayam , MO Group International, December 2008

About The Author:

Orad Elkayam is a veteran in the language services industry and a professional SEO strategist. Orad is the owner and founder of MO Group International, a multilingual search engine optimization and localization company based in Brussels, Belgium. www.mogi.eu.com MO Group International is a member of GALA, the Globalization and Localization Association. "In general, it is important to note that the amount of quality localized content on a website is positively correlated with the opportunity for that website to appear in the top rankings of major search engines. Additionally, by only having one localized web page potential clients are unable to access everything a website and brand has to offer. A company's international marketing strategy can be compromised when the global market has limited access to valuable website information that could contribute to worldwide brand recognition and online sales.

An online multilingual marketing strategy is essential for any business wanting to expand into international markets. Today, companies are spending thousands of dollars to develop and maintain localized websites outside their domestic market.

What good is this expense, however, if your website can't be found?

Perhaps the most difficult part of gaining online credibility is promoting a company's website in a variety of search engines, thereby allowing potential and existing customers to easily locate the website. With so much investigation surrounding search engine optimization it is important to understand multilingual search engine optimization (MSEO) is a more intricate process — without it, international marketing efforts will almost always be hidden behind domestic competition.

The Challenge

Regardless of the fact that consumers in Germany or Spain do speak English, they do not shop in English. The research firm, Common Sense Advisory, published a study, Can't Read, Won't Buy, in which the preferences of 2,400 shoppers outside the United States were questioned. More than half of the respondents indicated they make purchases only on sites in their native language; in France and Japan over 60% of respondents indicated similar preferences. Accordingly, when buyers search online with Google Germany or Google Spain, they do so in their native language. If a website is not set up with at least one* native language localized page and corresponding key words for the search engines, it will not receive a good ranking in search results and likely not be found. It's that simple.

Earlier this year, in Jupiter Research's Website Globalization Report, senior analyst Zia Daniell Wigder wrote: "Translation enables content to be locally read, but may not be sufficient to attract and retain international audiences if the content is not tailored to and optimized for local preferences and behavior. For example, companies should incorporate basic search engine optimization (SEO) for international markets into step two to ensure translated content includes the most relevant search terms in each local market."

A Multilingual Search Engine Optimization Strategy

Defining an MSEO strategy is an elaborate, time-consuming process because targeting keywords outside the English language requires research and expertise.

Today, search engines face difficulties providing accurate information on keyword searches in foreign languages, specifically languages with special characters such as Hebrew, Japanese, Chinese and Korean. These difficulties are a result of inefficient tracking technologies and their inability to function with certain languages. Additionally, Google, in conjunction with other search engines, is still trying to define how to register international search volume in the Google trends system. Currently, it is difficult to obtain search data with international words because English measurements do not apply in different languages. Per language, the volume of search data is still lower than English but by combining languages such as German, French and Spanish it is easier to achieve better results.

To develop an effective MSEO strategy, a thorough linguistic analysis of a company's industry is essential. This ensures an understanding of the technical jargon and popular key phrases in the industry.

A typical search engine optimization strategy begins with a solid keyword research process. In MSEO, however, the keyword research is more complex. Five standard MSEO steps include:

- Understanding key industry terms (construct a glossary when possible)
- Performing linguistic research of popular industry terms
- Performing search engine research on competition and popularity (as much as possible)
- Executing a full competitor analysis in the target language
- Consulting regularly with the product team to determine new keywords and industry terms

Website Modifications

With an MSEO strategy in place, the next step is to make any necessary website modifications. In general, MSEO involves rapid adjustment of multilingual text to fit search engines' ever-changing algorithms. In addition, the MSEO provider often needs to add significant amounts of multilingual content to the existing website. The modification process is similar to general localization, requiring ongoing management and the involvement of four separate teams:

The MSEO team is in charge of modifying the content and working closely with the localization and quality assurance teams. The localization team is called upon to translate new content while providing regular updates and translation memories for the website. The quality assurance team performs ongoing verifications of the updated web pages and ensures the content maintains its integrity. Finally, the client must remain in control of the website content. If the client is unable to ensure the validity of foreign language content, the content creation and localization process must be designed to work in partnership with the client.

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The last point is critical. Many companies do not have the in-house resources to validate the changes an MSEO vendor will suggest or implement. This results in inconsistent marketing messages and diminished quality of the website. In order to tackle this challenge, the MSEO vendor should provide a testing team, completely separate from the SEO and localization departments, which can offer an objective review of each change. An approved glossary from the client is still necessary, but this supplementary team will help ensure international consistency for the company.

With the appropriate teams established, genuine optimization of a global website can begin. The process of MSEO is similar to the English SEO process, with the addition of the following steps to promote the multilingual website:

- Website code optimization
- Website content optimization as per the keyword algorithm
- Website usability optimization
- Website quality testing
- Website submission
- Website link building in the target language

Translation/Localization Process

The translation process is affected by the intention to perform MSEO on future or existing multilingual websites. Due to frequent content changes and potential new keywords, translators will already have a pre-SEO guideline to follow once the localization process has begun.

It is not uncommon for translated websites to be unable to compete in their relevant online segment and for drastic or complete re-localization and re-writing to occur in order to regain a favorable position in the search rankings.

One client, a homeopathic medical herbs company Zellarazim.com, had already localized their website in German, Spanish, and French before seeking MSEO services. Starting the multilingual SEO process with this unique range of products and treatments revealed the selected terminology and key phrases used were not directed to the proper target market nor were they popular search terms. In this case, conducting a full linguistic analysis of the website and re-translating the entire site with the correct online terminology was essential.

The Benefits of Multilingual SEO

The benefits of the MSEO process are immense. It is important to realize that even though most internet users are not native English speakers, the majority of the search engine competition is still conducted in English. MSEO provides a relatively fast technique to brand and expand your business in the global market because search engine results in languages other than English occur faster. A website designed with SEO tools will enjoy a diversity of visitors, rapid growth, and steady traffic, ultimately improving the website's online position.

MSEO will also affect your international branding and allow you to create online connections and additional business opportunities that were previously beyond reach. Likewise, the ability for potential non-English partners and affiliates to actively search for the company increases awareness of services and products in the global online community.

In fact, MSEO can actually provide market advantage. For example, let's examine the following keyword combination in English and German – website translation and Website Übersetzung, using Google.de (the major stake holder of searches in Germany). The amount of competition for this keyword combination in English is about 12 million. In German, however, only nine thousand are competing for this keyword combination even though just about as many searches are performed in German as in English. As an MSEO company, we see this as a perfect chance to advertise a company's brand and achieve top search engine rankings more quickly.

Today, companies that engage in MSEO enjoy increased traffic, international branding and higher conversions from their website. There are many companies that can help with localization, translation and MSEO strategies. One great source for finding a vendor to support an MSEO project is the non-profit Globalization and Localization Association (GALA), which includes more than 300 language service companies from around the world.