



E-commerce Across Borders

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Tips on taking your web site global

Interested in expanding your potential online audience by 200 million people? Add French, Italian, German, and Spanish Web sites. Add Japanese and Chinese Web sites and you will gain another 300 million potential visitors — without opening a single international office.

Today, there are more than a billion Internet users around the globe. Yet based on my research fewer than 30% of these Internet users are native-English speakers. By 2010, that percentage will drop below 25%.

Savvy Internet retailers have learned to embrace the world; one country and one language at a time. Starbucks, Amazon, and IKEA, to name just a few, have all developed Web sites for foreign markets. This article takes a look at a few such retailers and some of the key challenges you will need to overcome when you take your business global.

Thinking Globally and Locally

Ideally, a company builds its global Web site in two stages: internationalization and localization. Internationalization is the process of preparing a Web site so that it can be easily adapted to multiple locales; a locale may be a country, a language, or both. Ideally, a company will design a “global template” that can then be localized for each new market. Once the template is developed, it is then customized, or localized, for each locale. The best way to understand how these two stages fit together is to see how they apply in real life, such as with the IKEA’s US and German sites, shown below.



The US and German IKEA sites convey a consistent global appearance



Notice how both Web sites share similar layouts, color palette, and logo placement. The internationalization stage of the development process would have entailed creating an architecture that could remain consistent across all locales, yet remain flexible enough to allow for local modifications.

During the localization stage, the product selection, promotions, phone numbers, prices, and support options are addressed. Although the two home pages may appear quite similar initially, the differences are significant.

Now look at two Wal-Mart country sites. Notice how the Wal-Mart US and China home pages have little in common. Clearly, no global template was ever created. As a result, Wal-Mart will find it difficult to create a global online identify as well as maintain these sites centrally – a strategy commonly employed as companies develop multiple localized Web sites.



The US and China Wal-Mart sites do not appear related



Building the Global Gateway

Just because you build a localized Web site is no guarantee that people will visit. Much overlooked in Web design is the navigation system that directs users to their localized sites. Webmasters at many of the world's largest companies tell me that up to half of all traffic to their .com domains originate from outside of the US. As a result, it is vital that companies develop a "global gateway" strategy for seamlessly guiding users to their local content.

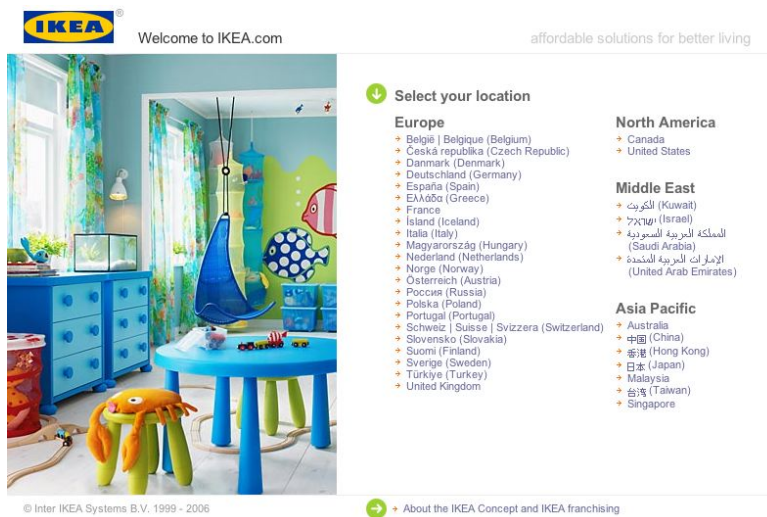
Too often, these global gateways are buried at the bottom of the home page, such as with Apple.



Buried at the bottom of this page is Apple's global gateway

Picture a user who only speaks Korean visiting Apple.com. Will that person have the patience to scroll to the bottom of the page?

Now picture that same person visiting the IKEA home page, shown here.



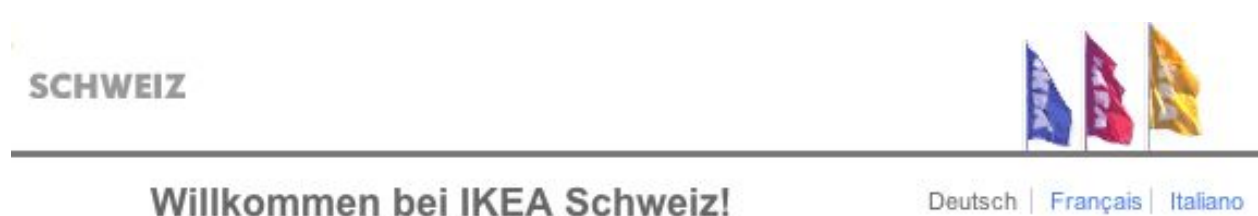
IKEA's global gateway forces Web users to pick their localized site



The IKEA gateway forces users to pick a locale, preventing them from getting lost along the way. Keep in mind that a global gateway is more than a few links or Web pages; it is a comprehensive system of design and technical elements that work together to provide a seamless shopping experience for any user, no matter the language or location. When developing your gateway strategy, consider the following tips:

1. **Reserve country-specific domain names.** For example, www.acme.com, when it launches its German site, would want to reserve the German domain www.acme.de. If you are thinking of expanding globally, start reserving those country domains.
2. **Always make it easy to get back to the gateway.** If a user gets to the German site by mistake and wants the Spanish site, always include a link back to the gateway.
3. **Avoid flags.** Many gateways rely on flags to denote locales, yet this is not often the best icon to use. For example, what flag would you use to signify Spanish? Also, the use of Taiwan's flag is bound to offend many Chinese Web users.
4. **Translate your gateway.** For example, instead of using a link to the Spanish site that says "Spanish," use "Español"; or use "Deutschland" instead of "Germany." Details such as these are often overlooked by Web developers who do not look at their sites from the points of view of non-English speakers.

Finally, sometimes you will need to localize a Web site into multiple languages to effectively cover one country, such as Switzerland. Although a relatively small country, Switzerland has four official languages: French, Italian, German and Romansch (a variation of German). Noticed how the IKEA Switzerland site is available in French, German, and Italian.



The IKEA Switzerland site is localized into French, German, and Italian.

Globally usable design

Pay close attention to the colors, icons, and photos you use on your localized sites. For example, a bride typically wears white to a wedding in the US, but a bride in China will wear red. Black signifies death in the US; in Asia, white signifies death. The significance of icons also may vary by locale, such as a mailbox, which may be blue in the US, but is yellow in Sweden.



All Support is Local

So much of Web globalization has nothing to do with the Web site: for example, employee training, product localization, and product support. Before your company takes the leap into a new market, be sure you can support not only the Web site but also the many customers and questions it will generate. Here are some key challenges to keep in mind:

- **Payment.** Always make sure your site can accept the preferred payment method of your target locale. For example, credit cards are not commonly used in Germany, where many customers prefer to pay by money order or debit card. For small businesses, PayPal promises to solve this problem with cross-national support for currencies such as the Euro, Canadian dollar, and Yen.
- **Support.** When you start receiving emails in different languages, do you have people prepared to answer them? And how about phone calls, faxes, and letters?
- **Manage Expectations.** When you first begin localization, you probably will not be able to offer all forms of customer support. But make it clear on your site what types of support you do and do not offer.

Web Globalization Cuts Both Ways

Given that companies ranging from Microsoft to Intel to McDonald's now owe more than half of their revenues to the world outside their native countries, globalization is showing little signs of slowing. As long as companies find success in new markets, they will need to localize their Web sites to serve these new markets.

This means that just as you can expand your business into a new market, so too can companies in foreign markets expand into yours. The time is now to begin preparing your globalization strategies. Web globalization is not easy and it is not always cheap, but you will find it is a lot easier and profitable to adapt your Web site to the world than it is to wait for the world to adapt to your Web site.

John Yunker is publisher of the popular Web globalization website and newsletter Global By Design (www.globalbydesign.com). Newsletter subscribers include companies such as Autodesk, FedEx, Google, Dow Corning, and Panasonic. John is author of Beyond Borders: Web Globalization Strategies.