

6 Strategies to Localize Your Site for a Global Audience

Sell more through geographic and cultural specialization



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Introduction

When merchants talk about localization, there's a common misbelief that hiring a talented translator and converting your text to the local language is more than enough to help spread your brand. After all, products and services translate across cultures and countries if we thoroughly explain them, right?

Unfortunately, no. When you're talking about the localization of your product or service over the web, there are more than a few key drivers that need to be taken into consideration. Obviously, the local language plays a big part, but other factors like colors, avenues for communication, and, above all, culture, will be the factors that ultimately make or break your success.

For example, did you know that in India the color white symbolizes death? That means that when you think your minimalist website provides a breath of fresh air from the clutter of the web, Indians may view it as a controversial reminder of mortality.

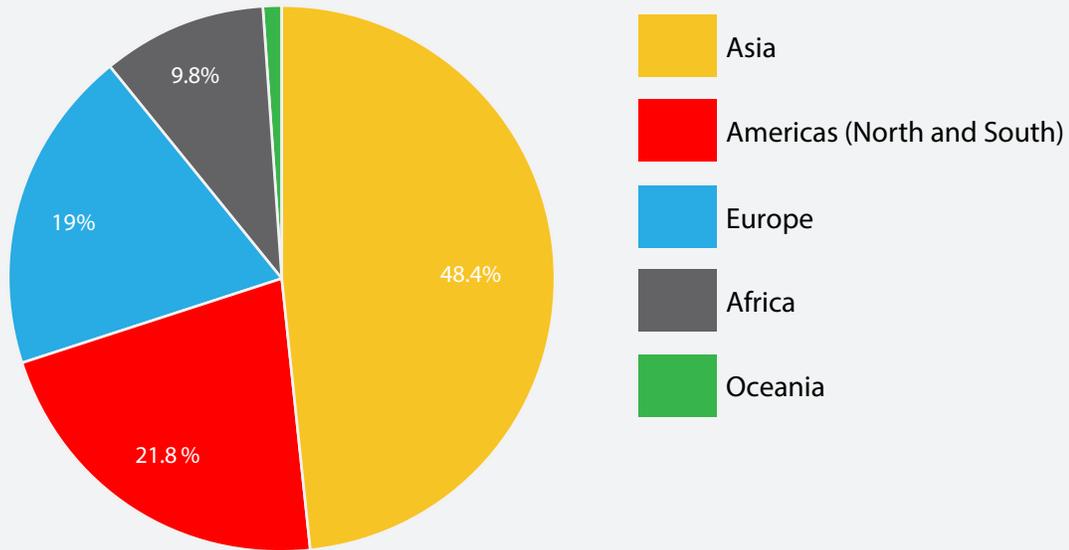
So, how do you avoid these obstacles and flourish in another country? By following a few simple steps upfront, doing your research, and ensuring that your content direction is on par to please everyone. Just remember — pleasing everyone doesn't look the same in every place, which is most of the battle and more than half of the fun.

Wait a minute, you're thinking. Why spread myself thin when I'm doing just fine? What's to lose if I only stay focused in my native country?

Turns out, a lot. In fact, according to Internetlivestats.com, the Americas only represent about 22 percent of Internet users in the world. Almost 50 percent reside in Asia and 20 percent are in Europe. That means if you're only focused on American residents, you're missing out on almost 80 percent of the world's Internet population.

Internet Users by Region

As of July 1, 2013:



As if we had to spell this out for you, that's no small slice of the pie.

If you weren't ready to learn about localization before, we'd be willing to bet you're ready now. Let's get started on the need-to-knows and nice-to-haves before you miss another sale.

strategy #1

Translate Your Site's Language Based on the User's IP Address

What it is...

By customizing your content and its language based on the user's IP address, you can provide a much more comfortable experience for international buyers with little effort.

Simply translating the language to a native tongue doesn't always produce the best results — anyone who's hit the "Google Translate" button can tell you that much. However, if you're just starting, this is a better step than none at all. Why?

For one, this effort tells the receiver that your company has at least thought about his or her market and has the customer's needs in the back of its mind. But to really sell an international consumer, you need to go further than attempting to rehearse the script you've already set up for yourself. You need to learn the language, adapt to its nuances and quirks, set up shop, and ultimately portray that you're ready, willing, and able to do business within a culture outside your own.

Is converting your site text based on the user's IP a good start? Absolutely, but it's just that. Don't think this is as important as it sounds? After all, English is spoken in most countries, right? Not necessarily. In fact, according to recent Common Sense Advisory research, 30% of 3,002 international respondents in a report never bought at English-language sites, and another 29% rarely purchased. More importantly, 56% either spent more time on sites in their own language than they did in English, or they outright boycotted English-language URLs altogether.

This data means you're missing out on a lot of global clientele because your code hasn't facilitated the right languages. While language targeting through IP may seem like a minor task, we're profiling it first because it's the most important on the list and takes marginal effort to utilize.

Action Steps

- ✓ **Step #1** - Identify the key countries and languages that are important to your business.
- ✓ **Step #2** - Consider this the first foray into localization, not the last.
- ✓ **Step #3** - Install plugins like [WP Geocode Filter](#) or [GeoIP Detection](#) so that your webstore can identify the countries and languages of your visitors.
- ✓ **Step #4** - Coordinate translated pages with each international IP you choose to target.

strategy #2

Voice-Over or Caption Your Content

What it is...

Many people think that translating their text serves the purpose of localization...but what about that creative video or the captions on your slideshow? Those touch points are just as important, if not more, than any other criteria you'll alter on your site. This is important for a few reasons. One, it makes sense that you'd want your international audience to understand what's happening across every corner of your website.

Perhaps you feel like translations or voice-overs aren't quite enough to get your message across? We hear you. Direct translations — especially in video and image campaigns — sacrifice emotional and cultural relevance across multiple nationalities.

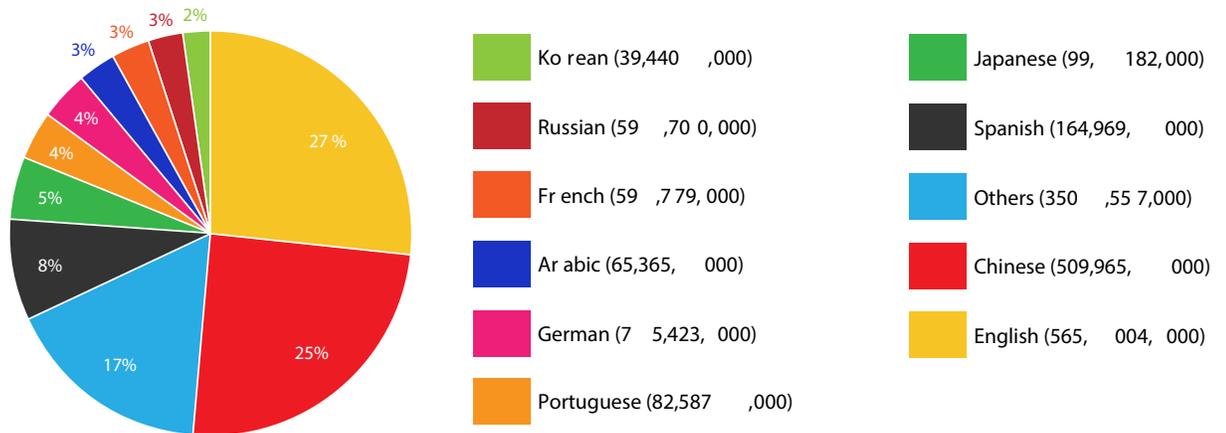
A better and more in-depth option is to create content that's exclusive to the country you're targeting. While this may not be possible due to resourcing and timing for each individual country, creating videos and images in the native language that addresses the culture, connects with the audience, and speaks directly to their pain points, wants, and needs, could go a long way in ensuring a smooth transition to a specific demographic.

But if that strategy isn't realistic, altering your content to include voice-overs or subtitles may be the next best thing.

Do you want to know why this step is so important? A 2012 Common Sense Advisory Report states that global brands need to offer content in 21 different languages to reach 90% of all visitors. While it may not be feasible to achieve that mark from the start, identifying a few key languages – Chinese and Spanish are spoken most by internet users after English – and converting your content to make it local-specific are two great actionables to begin attracting an international clientele that not only shows interest, but also kicks off the path to purchase.

Estimates of the number of internet users by language

As of May 31, 2011:



Action Steps

- ✓ **Step #1** - Focus on how your core content can be re-purposed and altered to make sense for localization.
- ✓ **Step #2** - Brainstorm options for creating content specific to your target country.
- ✓ **Step #3** - Identify the top 3 – 5 languages where your current content would make the biggest splash if you added subtitles or voice-overs.

strategy #3

Optimize for Local Search Engines

What it is...

To ensure your newly-translated site receives traffic, you'll need to decode how local search engines can find it with as few barriers as possible. The metatags and keywords that put you on the front page of Google in the States may not apply everywhere else. For search engine optimization, you need the home team advantage, and sometimes more. That means you need a helper on the ground in your target country who understands the keywords and major triggers in that area.

Why is this important? *Because if no one can find your site, no one can buy from it.* And the people who understand how to get your site noticed are (no surprise) living in the market you want to sell to!

Here's another point to consider: while you may think that keywords are the most important part of this strategy, you may be wrong.

The most important factor of international SEO is actually a country code web domain for your company. These contain such endings as .in (India) or .au (Australia) that signify the web address and location of the country you're looking to do business in. In this case, those two letters can make or break your efforts.

So you've got the basics covered: a specific domain for the local country and a local ready employee or contractor ready to help. Now what?

```
<link rel="canonical" href="http://www.example.com/es/" />
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="es" href="http://www.example.com/es/" />
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-AU" href="http://www.example.com/au/" />
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en" href="http://www.example.com/" />
```

Let Google work for you with an hreflang tag. What's that? Hreflang tags tell Google that your site has been translated to a specific language and should be prioritized in search rankings. This allows users to find you because Google recognizes that even though your content is similar in multiple places, your site is simply optimized, not duplicated. This tag also helps Google guide your new customers to the appropriate version of your site. Win-win-win.

Action Steps

-  **Step #1** - Don't simply translate your keywords and metatags into your new language — like everything else, they need to be evaluated and produced in the context of the culture they target.
-  **Step #2** - Leave it to the locals in your target market. Hire someone on the ground that understands your target country's SEO needs, wants and history.
-  **Step #3** - Utilize hreflang tags. Hreflang tags are your friends. Hreflang tags keep you away from the dreaded auto-translate function that Google loves.

strategy #4

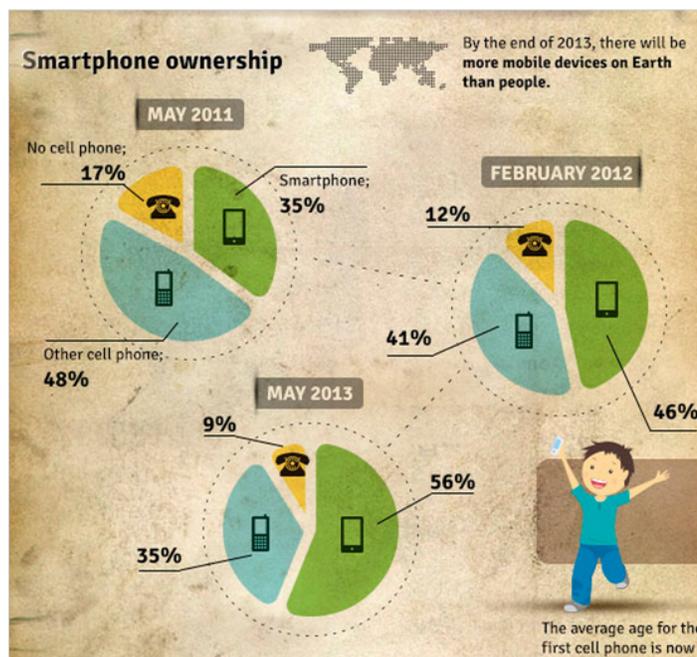
Mobile & Other Devices

What it is...

This is the giant elephant in the room: hopefully you understand the importance of mobile devices in today's day and age for a localization push, but if not, we're here to spell it out in clean and simple terms.

The fact of the matter is that a large percentage of the world accesses the Internet from mobile devices. In fact, according to State of Mobile research, global mobile traffic now accounts for 15 percent of all Internet traffic, and 50 percent of the average global web user now uses mobile as either his or her primary or exclusive means of going online.

But what does that really mean? For starters, State of Mobile also reports that 80 percent of global consumers plan to make a purchase using mobile in the next year. They also say that mobile devices top the list for the greatest impact on purchasing decisions.



<http://www.digitalbuzzblog.com/infographic-2013-mobile-growth-statistics/>

In layman's terms: mobile is everywhere and it's growing at breakneck speeds. If you're only focusing on desktops for your localization strategy and efforts, it's time to branch out. Why such a big swell toward mobile devices?

1. Cell phones are often cheaper than PCs
2. Personal phones can be carried around, hence the work mobile
3. Mobile phones power connection to the outside world in more ways than just e-commerce

However, when we're talking about mobile, we're not simply wiping the slate clean and starting from scratch.

You should keep in mind that many of the same principles we've covered previously still apply: locals want to be spoken to in their native languages with content created specifically for a targeted demographic. This approach ensures that your customer (mobile or otherwise) knows how to find you, and will make a huge impact in total market penetration.

For mobile localization, you'll want to stay cognizant of whether or not your target country has made the jump to smartphones or if they're still operating on WAP sites. By taking their technological state into consideration, you'll save yourself plenty of headaches and more than a few dollars by the end of the day.

Action Steps

-  **Step #1** - Plan mobile efforts in conjunction with web efforts — don't let one run away from the other. The content should be similar, if designed differently.
-  **Step #2** - Don't underestimate the power of mobile for many around the globe.
-  **Step #3** - Heed the same rules for creating and translating content across mobile that we've already discussed in previous chapters.

strategy #5

Redesign While Preserving Your Brand's Message & Tone

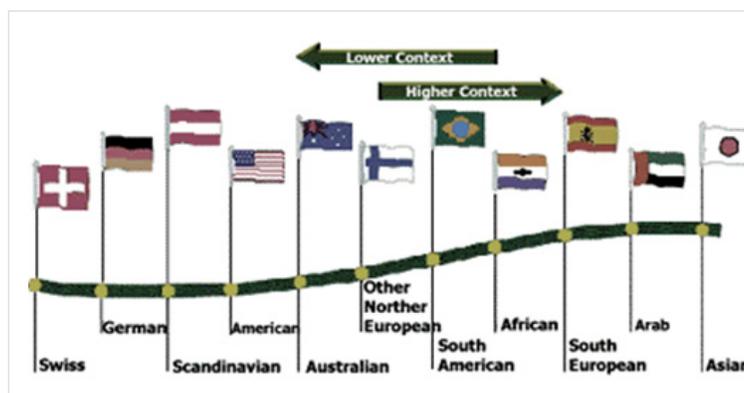
What it is...

Sometimes you have to start from scratch and build yourself back up. Think about a wardrobe change for your digital assets. You understand the importance of maintaining your brand across the digital and physical divide, or else you wouldn't be here. But what if your brand embraces individualism and personal choice while the country you're marketing in values collective experiences? What does that even mean, and how can you adjust your business to address it?

These are important details to know and take into consideration before plastering your website with images of solo people and inspirational quotes on independence. A good starting point to determine exactly who you're dealing with is to differentiate between high-context and low-context cultures. Edward Hall, an anthropologist, devised this notion in communication styles based on cultural expectations.

For example, high-context cultures like Japan and Greece put emphasis on family life or working as a group. In turn, they also tend to emphasize visuals over text, and view change as something that should happen gradually. High-context cultures can communicate through local and cultural messages that different cultures might not understand; in this context, local humor and non-verbals work well.

Low-context cultures, like the United States and Norway, put more emphasis on holistic explanations and value speed, learning by explicit instruction. In these cultures, multiple words



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are used to express concepts, and the value of one word holds less importance than in high-context cultures.

Knowing these types of markets when entering into a localization strategy can only help you to tailor your website and content accordingly.

Low-Context Culture

Value Universal Themes
Use Basic and Informative Imagery
Use More Words/Explanations
Universal Humor

High-Context Culture

Value Heritage & History
Use Local & Cultural Imagery
User Fewer Words With “Local Color”
Local Humor

All that said, this is still your brand. If an image or a color signifies YOU and is instrumental in your message, it's unfair to your identity to alter your persona to fit the local culture. You're expanding to a new country in the hopes of spreading your brand voice and instilling your message to a wider range of potential customers, so be careful to not dilute that message by catering solely to the crowd.

Action Steps

Step #1 - Do your homework and figure out the main drivers and deterrents for your target country.



Step #2 - Make an effort to restructure your website to adapt to the local culture's norms and expectations. A high-context culture will require much more work than a low-context culture.



Step #3 - Don't sacrifice your brand's values simply to fit in – you'll end up defeating the purpose of localization.



strategy #6

Localize on Social

What it is...

Often people think that if they nail the localization of their website, the international audiences will come flocking to their product or service in droves, with their wallets open. Unfortunately, a website is just one avenue to get your foot in the door and just one step in earning the trust, respect, and purchase from your consumers.

If you really want to speak the local language, you'll also have to study up on the local social media networks. And we'll give you a hint: Some of the most popular U.S. social sites don't reign supreme with huge swaths of international e-commerce buyers.

According to [eMarketer](#), worldwide social media users are expected to reach 2.55 billion people by the year 2017. That's a lot of people with the potential purchasing power to buy whatever you're selling. But what types of platforms are they using, and more importantly, how do you speak the language on a platform that isn't catered to English speakers?

Let's take a step back and look at the major players in two Internet heavy nations: China and India.

In China, a place where 91 percent of the nation's Internet users visit social media sites, networks like Qzone, Weibo and Youku dominate traditional U.S. platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Why? Quite simply because many of those platforms were – and still are, in some cases – banned by the Chinese government.

In India, around 56 percent of the population is under 30, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And unlike many e-commerce shoppers in the States who surf and shop on their PCs, these international buyers are heading increasingly to their mobile phones. Even more important: [Comscore](#) says that 86 percent of Indian Internet users spend time on social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Phew – finally something that sounds familiar!

But here's the part to pay attention to: social media is on all time, 24/7, 365. While a website localization strategy requires tons of foresight and planning upfront, a localization strategy for social requires a dedicated team that's working day-in and day-out to monitor, communicate and push your business initiatives further in the target country. You'll need to think long and hard about entering the social media world, no matter which country you're entering.

Top Social Media Platforms in the World

1. **Facebook** (1.15 billion MAUs)
2. **YouTube** (1 billion MAUs)
3. **Qzone** (712 million total users), China
4. **Sina Weibo** (500 million total users), China
5. **WhatsApp** (350 million MAUs)
6. **Google+** (327 million MAUs)
7. **Tumblr** (300 million monthly unique visitors)
8. **LINE** (275 million total active users), Japan
9. **Twitter** (240 million MAUs)
10. **WeChat** (236 million MAUs), China

Source: Business Insider <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-worlds-largest-social-networks-2013-12>

Action Steps

- ✓ **Step #1** - Research to understand which platforms are popular in your target country. If you've never heard of them, find an local expert who can explain the benefits of each.
- ✓ **Step #2** - Don't try to do it from your home base. Social media is about authenticity, and spreading yourself too thin will only come back to haunt you.
- ✓ **Step #3** - Be honest with yourself about resources. The only thing worse than not being on social media is doing social media poorly.

Conclusion

While it's certainly not easy to localize content for an international audience, it's well worth the effort when done correctly. After all, why would you want to limit yourself to a fraction of the potential consumer base when you have the opportunity to branch out and expand to a global arena?

Our recommendation is to take the slow and steady road towards success by starting with one region instead of trying to tackle them all at once. Nailing down as many local resources as possible is also a smart move and could provide you with the backbone of support to get you through some of the hairier moments you'll encounter along the way.

As with everything, authenticity, an understanding and respect for cultural sensitivity and a can-do attitude will get you going and hopefully, keep you afloat until you learn how to swim.

Have questions about these principles and tips or want to share your experience with applying them?

connect with us



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about the author



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Andrea is a writer and strategist who currently lives in New York City. For the last six years, she's worked as a social media strategist, brand consultant, and copywriter for brands including AT&T, Calvin Klein, and FADER Magazine. She currently writes on topics of culture, food, social media marketing, and travel.