# Free guide: don't just translate your website - localise it!

## How to internationalise your website - successfully

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*When considering expanding a business and entering new markets, an obvious place to start is to look to foreign markets, where the potential in terms of numbers of customers is enormous. And the cheapest and easiest way to do this is to use your shop window for the world - your website. But less than one third of all people surfing the internet today speak English as their first language. So if you want to tap into such markets, how do you do so effectively? And does it even make sense for you to do so?*

*This article looks at some of the wider issues- practical, cultural and linguistic - involved in building and marketing an international website.*

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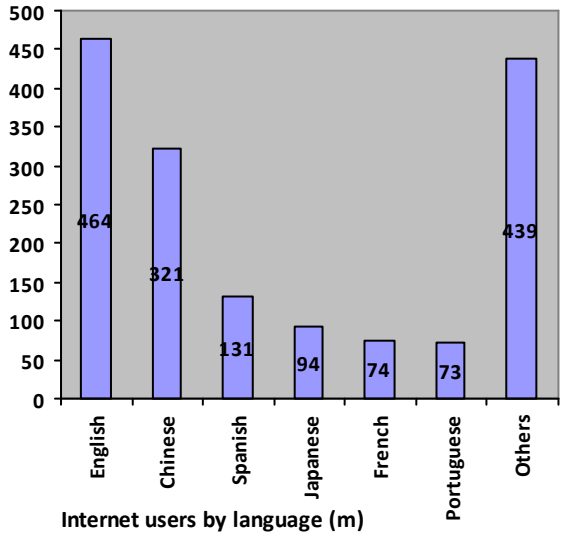
The online opportunity is growing bigger on a daily basis. By 2009, English was the primary language of just 29% (464m) of the world's 1.56bn users of the Internet - largely thanks to enormous growth in the numbers of users in China and Latin America. Furthermore, research has shown that non-English speakers are far more likely to visit websites written in their own language, and at least twice as likely to make an online purchase if they are addressed in their own language. The benefits of moving beyond English to address a foreign market are evident, and are growing more significant month on month.




### So I need to get my website translated into fifteen languages then…?

Well, not necessarily… For a start, translating your website into another language involves far more than copying and pasting text into a free online translator such as Google Translate, or setting up a 'one-click' link that enables users to translate key pages via an automated service (example: http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iwxC1-zObGGmevHxhtGcwlqm10Gw). It also involves more than putting it in the hands of a colleague who speaks a bit of the lingo. Quite often, even sending your home page text to a reputable translation agency along with a list of languages isn't enough.

For a start, who will you address? Which languages are spoken by the users you want to target? How do you choose which pages to translate? How do you know the pages will display properly in languages that use non-English characters, or alphabets and scripts that are completely different? How can you be sure that the quality of the translation reflects properly on your business? And, last but not least, how will users find your pages once the work is complete?

### Preparing to go global

These are all questions that need to be considered if you are thinking about truly 'going global' with your website. Remember that your website represents the professional image of your business, and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as such any attempts at communicating your message in another language need to reflect and be consistent with your brand image. But the project also needs to respect differences in culture and habits as well as in the language(s) spoken. This is ultimately how you will be measured.

Word-for-word translation of the text on your key pages is an obvious place to start the process of going global. But before you start doing this, you need to consider the wider issues. For example, if you sell a product, how relevant is it to that market, bearing in mind cultural, social and religious distinctions? You will probably need to translate (and redesign?) the packaging, plus any instructions or manuals that go with it. You may even need a new name for your product, especially if there is a risk that it translates as something unfortunate in the target (non-English) language [http://www.thethinkingblog.com/2007/09/13-unfortunate-translations-that-harmed.html]. You will also need to have set up an infrastructure so you can supply people in other countries, and so they can pay you quickly and easily in a range of currencies.

Furthermore, most users in developing or emerging countries use mobile phones as their primary means of accessing the Internet, because they cannot afford computers. How mobile-friendly is your website?

Finally, if you get all of that right, and suddenly a flood of orders or enquiries appears in Arabic, or Chinese, or Russian etc, how are you going to handle these?

**Don't just translate, localise**

Only when you have looked at these points and decided that this really makes sense for your business, should you actually think about going ahead with any translation, or, more specifically, localisation. The difference is subtle but important - and often overlooked.

Translation is simply one step in the process of localisation. The end product needs to have not just the right words, but be in the right register for your audience. It needs to use phraseology and imagery that they will respond to, and respect their culture and habits. You also have to consider how text in a non-Latin-based script will look on the page, especially where text has to run from right to left or in columns. Even European languages, such as German with its tendency towards longer words than English, can cause headaches where space is limited, such as in headlines and advertising copy, or where tight columns of text are used.

> *"If I am selling to you, I speak your language. If I am buying from you, dann müssen Sie in meiner Sprache sprechen." (Translation: "then you must speak my language.")*
>
> Former German Chancellor Willy Brandt

Furthermore, in Germany, for example, every website is required to carry a page called an 'Impressum' (essentially contact details, VAT and business registration numbers, directors' names etc). When localising websites from German into English, this is a struggle because it has no direct equivalent. If you are translating your site into German, you will need to construct and include an 'Impressum' of your own.

Finally, the end product needs to be easy for local users to find and easy access. This is localisation. Good translation will address some of this, but not all of it. Bad translation will just drive people away.

**The translation element**

Let's just take a brief look at how you distinguish between good and bad translation. Essentially, a good translation is done by human translators:

- that are translating into their mother tongue


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- that have recognised translation qualifications
- that have spent some time working in your industry and have some familiarity with it
- that are resident in, or have spent a substantial amount of time living in, a country where the language is spoken
- whose translation is checked and revised by a second, independent linguist, who also meets the above criteria, meaning that any inaccuracies or conflicts can be identified and resolved.

This will be your best guarantee that the final product will be accurate, sound natural in the target language (the language being translated into) and be culturally appropriate. If you have the resources to do this internally, all well and good. But it will probably be more convenient - and ultimately less draining on your resources - to appoint an agency to project manage this for you.

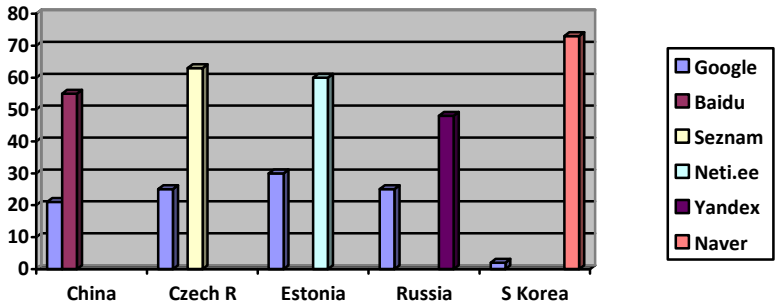
You can read more about good/bad translation and how to select a provider **here**.

**'Build it and they will come…'**

You have a beautiful website, perfectly structured, and well translated, yet your visitor stats are the digital equivalent of tumbleweed. It's an age-old problem for website owners. It's easy enough for people that know about you to find you, but how will people who don't know you find you? The answer of course is website optimisation. If this subject poses enough challenges for your English language website, you can imagine how many it will pose for foreign language versions of it.

The key thing here is that the same principles apply to the relationship between foreign language websites and search engines as to English language ones. Essentially, you need to have a good page title and description, good keyword-rich text on the page, keyword-rich links and image alt tags etc - all of which means that you need to have the best keywords for your service or product in all the right places in the appropriate language. But this does not mean just getting your English keywords and phrases translated into Brazilian Portuguese or Chinese. It means sourcing what people in these countries are actually looking for, what phrases they are entering into the search term box, and optimising for these.

Furthermore, 'appearing on the first page on Google' is no longer necessarily true. It is for English-language and most Western European websites. However, Baidu is easily the most popular search engine used in China (55% v Google's 21% in 2007), as is Seznam in the Czech Republic, Neti.ee in Estonia, and Yandex in Russia. Interestingly, in South Korea the top search engine is Naver with 73% of the market in 2007 - Google is barely even listed in the results table, at just 1.7%.




This is the second phase of getting your website properly localised. Optimisation is a research function rather than a translation function, yet one that your language services provider should be able to carry out for you (but not at standard translation rates). And translation of a web page **must** include translation of the 'hidden' extras such as the page title, description, alt tags etc - all essential for search engine recognition. Good translation agencies will work with translation software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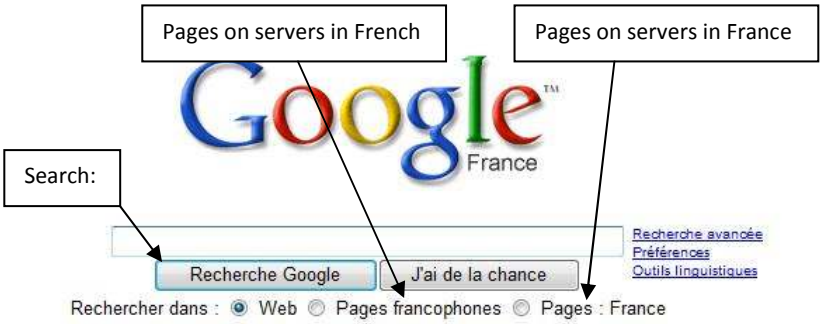
packages that can handle raw HTML or XML code and extract all this text from the code for a web page for translation.

Next, the site needs appear on those search engines of most significance to your target country/ies, whether by submission, natural spidering or pay-per-click campaigns.




Finally, you need to consider how important it is to have a '.fr' or '.de' etc domain name for your site. The importance of this is that a '.fr' domain name will be hosted on a server based in France, suggesting to search engines that you are based in France, and will get you included in all searches for French page results only. Some countries place restrictions on the availability of their country-specific domain names, for example, you can only get a '.de' domain name if you can provide a registered address in Germany. That said, there are ways around this, but you will need to address this. **[More on SEO]**

**And when they do finally come…**

And so to the final step in the localisation process. Your site is properly translated, properly optimised, maybe has a country-specific domain name, and at last enquiries and/or orders start coming in from people who don't speak (or prefer not to speak) English. How will you fulfil these?

Some things you will probably need are auto-responders and confirmation pages in the appropriate language; contracts, agreements and terms and conditions all localised; probably a localised FAQ page; quite possibly access to a linguist for handling foreign language email enquiries and responses; and maybe an interpreter for handling telephone enquiries. You may also need to consider setting up a localised postal address and contact phone number, or a virtual office.

Hopefully this has been useful for prompting thoughts about some of the wider issues involved with building an international website. A good language services provider should be able to offer advice and assistance in all of these areas, not just the translation element.

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If you have any questions about this article or about translating and localising a website, please contact **Gus Kenyon** at **Languages Today**.

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