

E-commerce across borders: How to take a web site global

By John Yunker

Interested in expanding your potential online audience by 200 million people? Simply add French, Italian, German, and Spanish web sites. Add Japanese and Chinese sites and you'll gain another 200 million—without opening a single international office. According to the research firm Global Reach, already more than half of web users are not native-English speakers. By 2007, native-English speakers will make up fewer than a third of all Internet users.

Savvy Internet retailers are learning to embrace the world—one country and one language at a time. Starbucks, Lands' End, L.L. Bean, Amazon, Office Depot—to name just a few—have all developed web sites for foreign markets. This article takes a look at a few of

these retailers and some of the key challenges you'll need to overcome when you take your business global.

Globalizing, one nation at a time

Web globalization is complex and potentially expensive, so it's important to begin slowly and build on early successes. L.L. Bean wisely took an incremental approach to globalization, one that limited upfront investment and risk, yet provided measurable user feedback on which languages were in the greatest demand. For several years, the only multilingual web pages L.L. Bean provided were customer support sections in French, Spanish, Italian, German, and Japanese.

L.L. Bean's pages were designed to assist shoppers who had some knowl-

edge of English but needed additional native-language support. Despite the limitations of this approach, providing a small degree of customer support is better than none at all. What made these few pages particularly valuable were that they allowed L.L. Bean to test new markets. By measuring click-throughs and eventual sales, L.L. Bean found that the most popular market, by far, was Japan. L.L. Bean already had a thriving direct mail business in Japan, but knowing that users wanted to also order online gave L.L. Bean the confidence to invest in a comprehensive Japanese web site. In June 2002, L.L. Bean launched www.llbean.co.jp.

So even if all you do initially is offer a few pages of customer support information in selected languages, consider it

websellingviews



Initially, L.L. Bean offered only customer support pages in selected languages.



The L.L. Bean Japan home page.



The U.S. and German Lands' End sites convey a consistent global appearance.

an important first step of an incremental approach to globalization. And once you get a taste for translation, you can begin planning for internationalization and localization.

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. Typically, a company will design a global template that can then be localized for each new market. Once the template is developed, it is customized, or localized, for each market. The best way to understand how these two stages fit together is to see how they apply in real life, such as with the Lands' End U.S. and German sites.

Both sites share strikingly similar navigation systems. The internationalization stage of the development process would have entailed creating a navigation system that could remain consistent across all locales, yet remain flexible enough to allow for local modifications. Also, Lands' End did not translate the slogan "Guaranteed. Period." on the German site. Some companies elect not to localize their key slogans, colors, or brand names, to create (and protect) their global identity. These global decisions are also made during the internationalization stage.

While the internationalization stage requires a degree of standardization, the localization stage requires just the opposite. For Lands' End, localization would be reflected in the product selection, promotions, toll-free German phone number, prices, and support options.

By contrast, the Wal-Mart U.S. and Germany home pages appear nothing alike. Clearly, no "global template" was ever created. As a result, Wal-Mart will find it difficult to create a global online identity as well as maintain these sites centrally, a strategy commonly employed as companies develop multiple localized web sites.

Office Depot has invested heavily in web globalization over the years, now offering 20 international web sites, across two brands: Office Depot and its subsidiary, Viking Office Products. In July 2002 it launched web operations in Belgium with not one but two web sites. Why? Because Belgium has both Dutch and French speakers and neither appreciates being left out. Had Office Depot chosen one over the other, as some companies do, it would have risked angering many potential cus-



To be successful in some countries, such as Belgium, retailers need to support more than one language.



The U.S. and German Wal-Mart sites don't appear related.



Hidden at the bottom of this page are the links to Sears' Spanish and Canada sites, (circled in red).

tomers. Another nice touch is that under the Viking logo are links that take the shopper back and forth between languages.

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. Too often these global gateways are too hard to find, as with Sears. A visitor to Sears.com who speaks only Spanish may lack the patience to find the Spanish link. The same person visiting the Ikea home page, will have no trouble at all learning how to navigate to the Spanish site. The Ikea gateway forces users to pick a locale, preventing them from getting

lost along the way.

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 a gateway strategy, consider the following:

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're thinking of expanding globally, start reserving those country domains.

Always make it easy to get back to the gateway. If a user gets to the Ger-

man site by mistake and wants the Spanish site, always include a link back to the gateway.

Avoid flags. Many gateways rely on flags to denote locales, yet this often is not the best icon to use. For example, which flag would you use to signify Spanish?

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 don't look at their sites from the points of view of non-English speakers.

Finally, sometimes you'll 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). Again, Ikea provides a good example with its Ikea Switzerland site available in French, German, and Italian.

Lost in the Translation

Translation is an art and like any art, is much more challenging than it appears. While writing requires proficiency in one language, translating requires proficiency in two languages. If you decide to translate your brand names or slogans, don't skimp on translators or testing. A minor oversight can result in embarrassing results, such as the Clairol "Mist Stick, a curling iron that was sold in Germany under its English name. In German, "mist" means "manure."

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 U.S., but a bride in China will wear red. Black signifies death in the U.S.; in Asia, white signifies death. The significance of icons also may vary by locale,

