

Global*by*Design

Web Globalization Intelligence

March 2006



Taking Icons Global

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Did you know...

India is now one of eBay's fastest-growing markets?

The "OK" hand signal has a negative meaning in Brazil?

Most cultures do not have the concept of a "middle name."

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About Us

Every month, *Global By Design* explores the art and science of Web and content globalization. We cover emerging trends, real-world Web sites, the latest technologies, and innovative vendors.

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Of Globalization and Homogenization

Why global Web design need not be boring Web design

In this issue we look at global Web design and where it is headed. We begin with the use of icons, with an eye toward those that have attained global recognition. We focus on the global design template and why it's an important – if not inevitable – element of global Web sites. Finally, we offer a brief defense of the use of flags on Web sites, albeit with caveats.

And while our focus is on the emergence of global design conventions, Web designers need not worry that these conventions will result in a new stage of less-innovative, globally generic Web design.

As companies speak to the world with one voice, they will naturally look to Web icons and templates that allow them to communicate more successfully and efficiently – with as wide an audience as possible. These design elements are the equivalent of road signs – helping Web users get to where and what they want more quickly without having to think too hard about it.

Instead of resulting in more generic Web sites, these road signs actually free up local offices to focus on what they do best – creating local content and innovative ways of presenting that content. So just as global standards evolve in Web design, so too will local creativity.

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Taking Icons Global

Trends and tips in using icons

In the early 1980s, to make computing less complex and intimidating, Apple launched a graphical user interface (GUI, pronounced *gooey*). This interface made extensive use of icons as well as the immediately popular desktop metaphor. Gone were the days of cryptic keyboard commands. Using a Macintosh, if a user wanted to delete a file, he or she simply dragged it to the trash can.



More than 20 years later, that trash can is still with us, along with a great many more icons. And many of the icons that found adoption on computers have migrated to Web sites. Today, icons are an essential tool for ecommerce, Web applications, navigation, and overall usability. But not all icons are equally user friendly, nor do all icons travel equally well globally.

In this article, by focusing on some of the world's most popular Web sites, we highlight which icons are becoming (or have become) truly global and which are not quite there yet. We also recommend tips to keep in mind as you make use of icons on your Web site.

Icons According to Yahoo!

Yahoo! makes extensive use of icons on its 30+ local Web sites to denote the various services and content it offers, such as sports, news, shopping, and personals.

Icons are in a constant state of evolution. We've studied the evolution of Yahoo!'s icons for years now and have noticed patterns in how icons have traveled – or not traveled – to new countries.

The icon that changes the most across Yahoo!'s many local Web sites is the sports icon, shown here. The US stands alone as the only market lacking a soccer ball. Yet it is interesting to note how other markets localize their sports icons.

Yahoo! Sports Icons



Source: Byte Level Research

To make matters more complicated, sporting icons may not only be localized but also *seasonalized* based on the dominant sport in that country at a

particular time. Currently, it appears that Yahoo! is using year-round sports icons.

Aside from sports, other icons exhibit more subtle changes. For example, the mobile icons below vary in a subtle but important way. For Korea, a music symbol accompanies the phone, indicating the popularity of ring tones and music downloads in that market, while the US features an additional PDA handset, which is a popular device among business users.

Yahoo! Localized Icons



Source: Byte Level Research

Despite the local variations, the majority of the icons used by Yahoo! are used consistently across countries and regions. The icons shown below are among the most globally consistent icons Yahoo! uses.

Yahoo! Global Icons



Source: Byte Level Research

However, even though the meaning of most of these icons does seem obvious, it's important to first compare Yahoo!'s use of icons with the icons of other popular, consumer-focused Web sites. For this we turn to Google.