WEB TECHNIQUES

Culturally Correct Site Design[1]

By Olin Lagon

A host of competent foreign companies are eyeing existing online business models, planning to launch their own versions, after adapting them to the cultural needs of their markets. They could be looking at yours as you read this article. The time to defend your brands and tailor your Web site for key markets is now.

A globalization manager with a very large business said his company thought it had the right approach: He translated the American-targeted copy into the local language and changed the photograph, switching to models of the targeted ethnicity. The photograph pictured a man and woman of the correct ethnicity, with the woman demonstrating to the man how to use the company's product. This was an unacceptable breach of accepted gender roles in the target country. Furthermore, even though the models were of the correct ethnicity, they had an American look. It also didn't help that the man in the picture wore a green shirt, something associated with people from a neighboring country with whom the target market had less than friendly relations. The globalization manager quickly learned that his team had made mistakes, as his foreign customer was shocked with the results. With one seemingly innocent picture, his group committed multiple cultural offenses. The content had to be totally redesigned.

You can avoid these kinds of design mistakes by being sensitive to direct and indirect meanings hidden in your localized content, and by recognizing that your overseas users have different needs, such as preferring to use their own currency. One way to develop a strategy on how you should adapt your Web site is to study great examples. The regional Web sites of QXL, eBay, IBM, Siebel, and IKEA offer valuable insight on effective design localization.

QXL
Here's an excellent example of a small company becoming a giant one by taking a successful business model and adapting it to suit foreign markets. Tim Jackson, founder of QXL, recognized that Europe's markets had regional auction needs that eBay, at that time, wasn't meeting. So he created a company that satisfied these needs by offering multicurrency bidding, country-specific merchandise, and expertise in dealing with local logistics requirements, as well as supporting local charities. One of QXL's biggest design challenges was to come up with a system for sellers to sell in their native currencies and buyers to bid in their native currencies. QXL designed an incredible system by

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standardizing the way buyers bid for items. Buyers enter their bid amount by pressing a + or - button, which goes up and down through the published bid increments. Though customers are always bidding in their native currencies, sellers are actually selling some of the products in other currencies.

For example, Figure 1 shows you a monitor for auction at 300,761 Italian lira. A buyer enters a bid by pressing the + button, which increases the bid in increments of 3079 lira. Though the user is bidding in lira, the seller has actually priced this product at 103 British pounds with a 1-pound increment. So, the buyer is really bidding in 1-pound increments, and the system converts all amounts in real time to lira using an exchange rate updated daily. This is all run by JavaScript with values seeded in from QXL's auction server.

eBay

In response to overseas competition from auction sites like QXL, eBay has recently launched extremely good culturally adapted versions for the Australian, Canadian, German, British, and Japanese markets, as well as a version targeting the English-speaking Chinese market that it calls "Chinatown."

What makes eBay an interesting adaptation example is its Chinatown version. Instead of modeling it after the U.S. version, eBay created a completely different concept to suit the preferences of its target market. It has a unique appearance, and original content like horoscope information and fortune telling. The only items translated into Chinese are the categories on the home page and parts of the chat system. In addition to the shared categories, Chinatown has its own categories like Feng Shui.

For the other language versions, eBay uses a fairly straightforward approach. The bidding categories and base content remain the same as the U.S. version, though each version has been slightly modified to reflect the tastes and local content of each particular market. The Japanese version, for instance, uses softer colors and local content called "super shops." Additionally, eBay extended the Japanese search engine to support items auctioned in yen, items for bid from sellers in Japan, and items for bid from anywhere in the "eBay world" that can be shipped to Japan.

Siebel Systems

The developers of the Siebel Systems site paid a lot of attention to detail while adapting its internationalized sites. My favorite design element is simple to implement, but all too often ignored by most major Web sites—a feature that lets users know in advance which content is not localized. Most multilingual sites don't warn non-English users when they're about to enter a section of the site that isn't translated into their language and localized for their culture. However, when a user mouses over a link on the Siebel site that points to such content, a gentle pop-up notice explains that the content is available only in English (see Figure 2).

The Siebel site has multiple entry points to each language version. For instance, to get to the Japanese version you can go through the U.S. home page and switch countries, or go directly through any of the following URLs: www.siebel.co.jp, www.siebel.com /japanese, or www.siebel.com/ja. And if you switch languages from the U.S. version to the Japanese version, you'll see a message in Japanese that you're being redirected to the Japanese version. Little details like this really add up to quality adaptation design.

IBM
Here's one of the best examples of a site that has a core set of content, regional information, and a consistent appearance across all language versions. IBM maintains one-page minisites containing local contact information for 166 countries and complete Web sites for 78 of those countries. Table 1 provides some insight into the markets IBM feels warrant a complete localized Web presence. Of all the African countries, IBM built a complete site only for South Africa. In the Americas, almost all countries, including tiny Caribbean islands, have full Web sites, except for Belize, Martinique, and Mexico. (Note that in April 2000, IBM had full Web sites for both Belize and Mexico.) Of all the Middle Eastern countries, only Israel has a full Web site.

At WorldPoint, our cultural experts noted that the Indonesian and Vietnamese versions both used the same male model while the rest of the Asian sites used local models. Passing off nonlocals as locals is not effective marketing.

IKEA
This furniture company has an unusual strategy—it produces a generic global version in English, maintains 14 complete localized Web sites, and has 30 minisites that contain only contact information. IKEA has made good use of regionally tailored photos. Figures 3 and 4 display the Italian and Saudi Arabian local sites. The Italian version shows a group of people frolicking on their furniture. In Italy, sexy advertising is effective for product branding and marketing. Nudity is commonplace and acceptable on billboards and public television. The Saudi Arabian version, on the other hand, contains extremely conservative photos. The home page photo doesn't even show any of IKEA's products. Instead, IKEA chose the image of a local man pushing his son in a shopping cart to meet the culturally acceptable marketing standards of the region.

Like IBM's sites, IKEA's different language versions all share the same appearance and have regional information as well. For instance, the Hong Kong version has local information about using an installment payment plan and the Saudi Arabian version has local job listings.

Great Reference Books

Although viewing live Web examples is one of the best ways to learn, I've found it handy to have a few cultural-issue reference books around like Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: How to Do Business in 60 Countries by Terri Morrison (Adams Media). I learned in this book that in Japan the color white is associated with funerals, and to avoid groups of four on Japanese sites because the Japanese words for "death" and "four" have the same pronunciation. Or that in Germany, punctuality is extremely important and that they expect information to be up-to-date. Other excellent books include the entertaining Do's and Taboos Around the World by Roger E. Axtell (John Wiley & Sons) and Dun & Bradstreet's Guide to Doing Business Around the World by Teresa C. Morrison, et al. (Prentice Hall Press).

Before you design Web sites targeting foreign markets, it's critical to spend quality time analyzing what those before you have created for those markets. IBM's site is a great reference as it covers a wide range of countries. The knowledge you'll gain by viewing the existing designs will help guide you toward your own successful cultural adaptation strategy.