

## The Localization Imperative in Web Design\*\*

Arun Pereira / Nitish Singh

### Introduction

Designing a web site that draws customers, builds trust and loyalty, and is invulnerable to competitive marketing actions—is akin to *branding* the web site. After all, a successful brand enjoys exactly the same type of characteristics. As such, web sites that aim for success in the global market place, must understand the lessons of branding.

Building a brand is a complex endeavor with no guarantee of success; however, what all successful brands have in common is a customized and, dynamic marketing strategy. Such a strategy entails the continuous customization of marketing elements to the changing needs of a target market, sustained over time. The need to customize (or “localize”) web sites is not without controversy. More specifically, it is part of the larger debate of standardization versus localization, initiated by Elinder in '60s and then again by Levitt in the '80s. However, notwithstanding some views that favor standardization, there is overwhelming research support for the need for customization, including a five-nation study that we completed on perceptions of online customers with regard to attitude toward web sites and purchase intention.

---

\*\*Adapted from *The Culturally Customized Website* (N. Singh and A. Pereira; Elsevier(2005))

## **Standardization Vs. Localization**

The debate on the appropriateness of standardization versus localization in international marketing continues to receive attention. The debate is complicated in the context of the World Wide Web as it is a global communication medium, where technology makes mass customization or adaptation possible, while forces of global integration and the emergence of transnational web style (Sackmary and Scalia, 1998) justify the use of standardized web marketing and communication strategy.

The advocates of the standardization approach argue that as technology develops and is globally dispersed, cultural distance will be minimized, leading to convergence of national cultures into a homogenous global culture. On the other hand, there are a number of studies (including one discussed below) in support of customizing web sites to specific markets across the world.

Research shows that consumers prefer to shop and interact from sites that are specially designed for them in their local language. More than 75 percent of Chinese and Koreans online shoppers prefer web sites in Mandarin and Korean respectively (Ferranti, 1999). Similarly, French and Spanish have a strong preference for sites in their local language (Lynch et al., 2001). Online users feel more at ease when browsing web pages in their local languages. A survey by Forrester Research confirms that non-English speaking users stay twice as long on localized web sites as they do on English-only web sites, and business users are three times more likely to make purchases online when addressed in their local language ([www.forrester.com](http://www.forrester.com)). Forrester Research also concludes that customer service costs drop when instructions are available in local languages. Several studies have confirmed that country-specific web content enhances usability, reach, and web site interactivity, leading to more web traffic and business activity on the Web.

And, as seen next, our research indicates the same that web sites that are customized to specific countries enjoy strong advantages compared to those that are not.

### **The Study**

Our study focused on web sites and consumers from five countries: Italy, India, the Netherlands, Spain, and Switzerland. Web sites from these countries were sampled and evaluated by respondents on the following criteria. The criteria measure *adaptation to countries*, and were evaluated on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

1. The web site reflects some aspects of my country's culture.
2. I feel the web site was developed for my country.
3. The web site has enough information about my country to make me feel comfortable.
4. The images, colors, information & symbols on the web site are reflective of my country.

The average scores (across the four criteria) were calculated for each web site, and using percentiles, web sites for each country were categorized as High, Medium, or Low in adaptation. Next, respondents from Italy, India, the Netherlands, and Spain were given questionnaires to evaluate the web sites on *attitude to the site*, and *purchase intention*. A total of 627 completed questionnaires were used in the analysis. As the results in Table 1 indicate, attitude towards the web site and purchase intention were strongly in favor of highly adapted web sites.

Measures	Adaptation Level <sup>a</sup>			F	Tukey or Dunnet c tests <sup>b</sup>
	High	Medium	Low		Group Comparisons <sup>c</sup>
<b>Italy</b>					
Attitude toward site	3.60	3.57	3.34	2.80*	
Purchase Intention	3.06	3.10	2.68	6.76**	L<M; L<H
<b>India</b>					
Attitude toward site	4.26	3.74	3.04	60.7**	L<M<H
Purchase Intention	4.04	3.68	3.18	36.8**	L<M<H
<b>Netherlands</b>					
Attitude toward site	3.48	2.97	2.87	8.26**	L<M<H
Purchase Intention	2.34	1.91	2.19	ns	
<b>Switzerland</b>					
Attitude toward site	3.59	3.16	2.69	19.6**	L<M; L<H
Purchase Intention	3.16	2.93	2.64	3.4*	
<b>Spain</b>					
Attitude toward site	4.31	3.50	2.82	34.9**	L<M<H
Purchase Intention	4.14	3.30	2.67	31.7**	L<M<H

<sup>a</sup> Note: Mean Values are reported. <sup>b</sup> Comparisons that are significant at <.05 level are reported  
<sup>c</sup> Note: H=High adaptation, M=Medium Adaptation, L=Low adaptation.

Table 1: MANOVA Results and Post Hoc Group Comparisons

The results in general show that web sites depicting high levels of adaptation were ranked higher followed by medium and low adapted web sites. To further check the degree of significant differences in perception of web site effectiveness by level of adaptation we performed post hoc analysis. The post hoc analysis reveals that Indian and Spanish consumers rank highly adapted web sites higher than medium and low adapted web sites on both *attitude to the site* and *purchase intention*. Dutch and Swiss consumers rank highly adapted web sites higher than low

and medium adapted web sites on *attitude toward the site*, but on *purchase intention* differences are not significant (however, mean values of local web sites are higher than other web sites).

Finally, Italian consumers only showed better *attitude to the site* and high *purchase intention* for highly adapted web sites.

## **Conclusion**

Today, the process of developing customized global web sites is termed *web site globalization*, which in turn includes two complementary processes: *web site internationalization* and *web site localization*. Together, they address issues that go beyond language translation and include the need to incorporate local date, time, purchase order, zip codes, currency calculators, and a plethora of icons and features to make web sites understandable and readable by international consumers. In technical terms, *web site internationalization* is the process through which back-end technologies are used to create modular, extendible, and accessible global web site templates that support front-end customization, and *web site localization* is the process of the front-end customization, whereby web sites are adapted to meet the needs of a specific international target market. The web sites of tomorrow that will enjoy the advantages of powerful branding will tend to be ones that understand the value of localizing content to specifically targeted customers.

---

