

Having an online presence is essential for any business these days, wherever in the world your company operates. If you want to reach customers overseas, having the right website can be a key tool in attracting customers and making sales.

Making sure a website is relevant for a foreign market goes beyond merely translating the copy on your site (although doing that well is important too, as we'll see shortly!). There are many other cultural issues you'll need to bear in mind for other aspects of designing your site.

Content

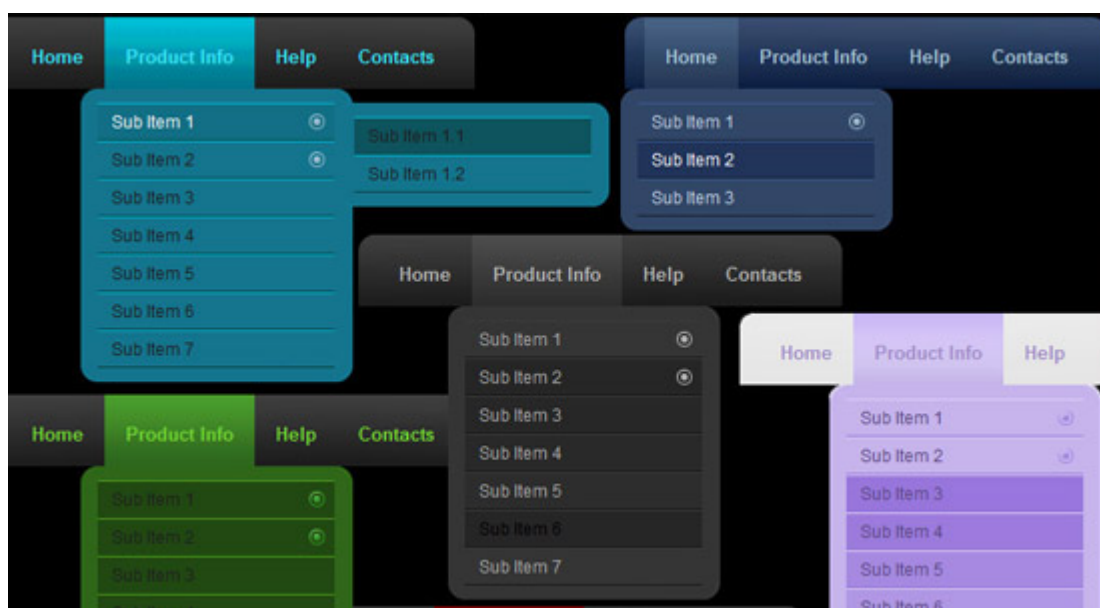
Obviously, you'll need to get the content on your site right for the audience that you're aiming for. Whilst you can add auto-translation widgets and tools to your site quite easily, these aren't usually the best option. They're prone to throwing up stilted and sometimes incorrect translations, which don't have a professional tone and could reflect badly on your business - poor copy doesn't exactly convey how much you value your customers.



Ideally you should use a professional translator, whose native language is that of your target market. They'll be able to provide a polished tone for your site and make sure it's grammatically correct and culturally sensitive.

Navigation

Whilst in the UK and US we're used to seeing navigation bars along the left-hand side of our screen, this may not be the ideal solution in some markets. We read from left to right, but not all countries do - Arabic and Hebrew, for example, are read from right to left. Although there are ways that you could flip the navigation bar to the right-hand side and reverse the direction of the script, the simplest and most professional-looking option is to opt for a horizontal navigation bar at the top of the page.



Colours and images

Colours do make your site look eye-catching and attractive, but it's important to consider wider issues when choosing them for your site for a foreign market. Red, for example, can mean different things to different people. In Western cultures it tends to signify danger or love, whilst in China it denotes good luck and celebration.

You need to do your research before settling on a colour scheme. Experts suggest that blue or grey are good neutral colour choices if you're in doubt. Lively colours such as orange, purple and red are best avoided, unless you have done your homework.

You need to choose the images for your localised websites carefully too. For example, if you're targeting customers in Japan, it's better to display some Japanese people on the site rather than images of American people only. Make sure the images are culturally sensitive

too and will not cause offence in your target market.



There is some research which suggests that different cultures use different styles to communicate. Anthropologist Edward Hall carried out some research in this area. He described 'high context' cultures, for instance Japan or China, as cultures where a lot of information is taken from the context in which the information is delivered, whereas 'low context' cultures, such as Germany and Scandinavia, prefer clear, explicit information.

In terms of web design, this may mean that an intuitive, image-heavy design would work best for a Japanese market, whereas a minimal look with concise instructions may be more effective for Swedish customers. You will get a feel for this if you study the localised sites of major multinational companies.

Tools

When you're creating numerous localised websites - one specifically for each market that you're aiming at - you want to make sure each localised site can easily be switched between languages without you having to design it from scratch each time.

UTF-8 is highly recommended because it incorporates the characters for more than 80 languages, meaning your site can easily flip between German, Arabic or even Chinese.

Cascading Style Sheets, or CSS, are also very useful because they allow the flexibility of

changing the content later on as required - the design (including elements such as layout, colours and fonts) is kept separate from the content. The benefit of this is that multiple pages can share the same design template and therefore each foreign language page doesn't need to be redesigned from the ground up.



Avoid using too much Flash on your site as it can make web pages load more slowly. If visitors have to wait for a while - even a minute - for a web page to load, they're likely to give up and close the page and you'll have lost a customer.

Cross-cultural web design may seem complicated but it doesn't need to be. It's just about making your site relevant to the language and cultural needs of your target market, whether they're in London or Tokyo. The effort will be well worth it, too, in terms of customer retention and sales.

About the author

Christian Arno is the founder of [translation services](#) company Lingo24, experts in the foreign language internet. Launched in 2001, Lingo24 now has over 150 employees spanning three continents and clients in over sixty countries. In the past twelve months, they have translated over forty million words for businesses in every industry sector. Follow Lingo24 on Twitter: [@Lingo24](#).