Tips for web site localization

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Your company is expanding to foreign markets and you've been chosen to oversee the localization of your company's web site. You built the web site and you know all about it: every page, each navigation button; scripting, coding, applets, cascading style sheets, etc. But you don't have a clue about the translation process. At this point, you are doing some research about translation and localization and may seek some guidance. You need a plan - identifying possible challenges and implementing the most cost-effective processes.

Here are some tips that can help you:

1. Do not translate your web site only because everybody is doing it. Carefully evaluate your business needs and establish performance indicators to measure your success (or lack thereof). Most managers these days demand return investment on all marketing activities. It will be to your advantage to be able to show bottom line improvements (i.e. online sales in Germany increased 20% or support calls dropped by 10% after we launched the German web site).

2. Identify which section of the web site needs to be translated and define a handoff process to your translation vendor. Some of the web pages are simple HTML files which can be easily opened and translated. But with anything non-HTML, the text often has to be extracted. This category includes all the graphics that contain text, Flash files, and PDF files.

3. Try to provide your translator with all of the source files from the very beginning (such as cost estimating). Do not copy and paste every page of your web site in a Word file. It is not necessary and can be time consuming. Even though your translator can download all the files from your web site, it is still a much better practice to hand over all the files relating to the web site. Word count and cost estimates can be very inaccurate if the translator doesn't have all of the files to work with.

Actually, if you have a dynamic web site, the word counting could be off by a long shot because of the unnecessary repetitions.

4. Make sure that your translator uses a translation memory (TM) tool. A TM tool keeps all the translated material in a database and makes it available for any future updates. Using a TM tool can help you save money, improve consistency, and speed up turnaround. In addition, working within a TM tool, tags and script code are recognized and protected during content translation.

Provide your translator with any available reference material such as translation guidelines, previous translations and glossaries. The guidelines can address issues such as what terms should be left in English, punctuation, adaptation of date/time format, addresses, symbols, and measurement systems. A glossary is a multilingual terminology list that defines how abbreviations, product names, or industry specific terms should be translated. If the translator is using a translation memory tool, these glossaries can be imported to ensure consistency.

5. Provide your translation vendor with original graphic files including navigation buttons, Flash objects, textual graphics, and PDF files. These will have to be localized as well. It's in your best interest to send the native PhotoShop and Illustrator files that were used to create the GIFs and JPEGs on your web site! Also, some languages such as French and Spanish are often longer than English. So, you should keep this text expansion in mind when you create your initial graphics to allow for longer text. The desktop publishing specialist at your localization company will keep the background image and will reconstruct the layers containing text and merge them to make the target language images for web.

6. Do some testing after the initial localization is done to make sure that the site looks good and works properly. Check the visuals first. Then do some functionality testing (such as creating and filling out a test form) to see if any function was lost during the translation process. Check to make sure that all necessary pages have been uploaded and translated, all the links are working, and that the translated text can be viewed properly (your developer should change the character encoding according to the target language).

In addition, you should perform testing to ensure that your web site works well on different platforms, operating systems and browsers at this phase.

Make sure that the translator or agency understands how browsers work with special characters (diacritics). If your localizer is working or making revisions on the translated text in HTML mode, be careful to never enter characters with accents into the code itself. Certain browsers could display the web page incorrectly.

7. Some translators will try to differentiate the localized files from the source files by adding a distinguishing extension for each language (the French file for home.html will be named home_fr.html). When this happens, every link reference in every file will need to be renamed to point to the right link. This will be time consuming and it will increase the possibility of creating errors. Instead of doing this, it is better to store each language version in its own folder.

8. Almost every target language requires localization of measurement systems, date format, punctuation, the thousands/decimal system, and colours. Everyone involved in the localization process should have cultural sensitivity to avoid offensive content.

9. Pay attention to web site layout when localizing in a language like Arabic or Hebrew. Because these are right to left languages, it is most likely necessary to redesign the layout (especially when your web site has navigation bars on the left).

10. If you want to optimize your multilingual site you should be aware that not all major search engines are working properly with foreign pages and your web site may not be listed in many of them. Also, the terminology your translators prefer (however correct or appropriate) might be VERY different from what your customers are using to find you. You must understand how your customers search online to effectively achieve high rankings and good online results. You should do research on what the major local search engines are and what your competition is doing.

Author's Background

Felicia Bratu is a translation project manager with wintranslation.com, a translation services provider in Canada. wintranslation.com provides website translation and localization services in 70 languages.

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