

Optimizing a localizer's website: SEO challenges

Gary Muddyman

As we progress towards the completion of our revamped website, we need to consider a crucial issue that is a bit of an irony for localization firms — search engine optimization (SEO) or, more specifically, international SEO. The irony arises from our expertise in language and culture, local terminology, habits, tastes and so on. We should be experts at this. After all, search terms, key words and local buyer behavior should all be well within our competency.

I know that some of our competitors offer this service, but I believe it is in its relative infancy. Many large companies and organizations are only beginning to think about SEO itself as a means of improving their visibility online, and the added complication of doing this across borders and languages is a further step away. Creating a multilingual site is one thing, but optimizing that site in all languages is something we haven't yet found any real evidence of.

Overall, this is probably due to the fact that good internationally optimized websites are so rare that site owners face four levels of intertwined complexity in achieving their goals:

- Technology — the coding language and architecture of the site.
- Domains and sub-domains — using local domains such as *.com*, *.co.uk*, *.de* or *.fr*.
- Language — multiple languages mean multiple pages or sub-domains.
- Geographies — search engines give regionally biased results, and in some cases, like Baidu in China, one search engine dominates but doesn't operate in other regions.

Evidence shows that some large or particularly web-savvy companies are optimizing for different geographies in the same language — for instance, the United Kingdom and United States — but I think that some of the barriers listed in the next section are currently getting in the way of companies conducting true international optimization.

The scarcity of true international optimization, however, means that a prize probably exists for those in competitive international product sectors who get there first.

Barriers to international SEO implementations

A few challenges exist for many organizations looking to optimize on a global scale:

- The original company website is typically commissioned by a local or nationally rooted company that does not even optimize websites for the breadth of the local audience, let alone internationally optimize them.
- Construction/architecture. The way in which the site is built makes adding languages difficult, particularly with regional options (Spain vs. Argentina Spanish).
- Ownership. Often websites are owned by multiple owners across geographies. These may be local marketing people who have their work cut out to provide a local-language version of the company site. Again, achieving that successfully is a big enough challenge, and they are unlikely to be directed to optimize it as well. Even if they are, the technical ownership of the site and the way the site is constructed may well get in the way of local optimization.

Technology

We see a number of different ways to localize your website, and all of them in action in the web. Each approach has different pros and cons.

Cookies can be used to identify which language the user has selected within a website. The issue here is that, regardless of language, the URL doesn't change. As search engines don't pick up the cookie and can't index one page as having content in various different languages, then the search engine will only index the "main" or initial language, with the obvious implication that the site won't be found on search engines based in other languages.

Other implementations of content management systems may use URL parameters. In our opinion, however, the best indexation will appear if we have separate URLs for each language.

Another option is to use sub-domains for different languages. The advantages of using sub-domains are multifold. For example, a separate sitemap can be created for each locale, and web analytics may thus be easier to understand and deploy, particularly as visitors may come from a number of different geographies and time zones.

It may make sense for global organizations to have local domains for countries where they have a presence. They might have a *.co.uk* domain in the United Kingdom, for example. The user also needs to consider where the site is hosted and how external parties may link to the site. For example, when we look at the three options in Table 1 for a two-language site, we see certain pros and cons depending on the chosen URLs.

Other considerations for an international SEO

- What regional directories to target.
- What the region's key search engines are. Baidu is strong in China, and although Google is the dominant search engine in the United Kingdom, Yahoo! may have more of a share in countries such as India.
- Vertical search engines are also a factor. For example, *www.rightmove.co.uk* dominates in the UK property search, but a country such as Kenya may not have a dominant player.
- Link-building strategies will differ by country. Highly page-ranked sites that impress Google may be irrelevant to a local population, and local sites are needed to actually provide links as well as Google PageRank.
- Press release and/or article networks will work in different ways.
- Feeds into Google or other comparison sites — for example, Google Base/Froogle that only allows products from a given site to be shown in one region — need careful consideration.
- Analytics needs to take various time zones into consideration.
- Keyword research tools such as Wordtracker are good for the United States and now acceptable for the United Kingdom. Search habits would be different for other languages, however, such as those that read right to left.
- Hosting. We know that a *.com* domain hosted on a UK server will make it to *www.google.co.uk*, but the same site hosted in the United States will find it difficult to get local listings in *.co.uk*.
- Currency conversions. Products such as Google Analytics can't deal with multiple currencies, so data can easily be misinterpreted with an e-commerce site processing euros, pounds sterling and dollars, unless thought is given to exchange rates. The site may require conversion to an agreed currency for the analytic tool in question.

Conclusion

The first take on the information above is that true, effective international SEO is hard to achieve. Nonetheless, I believe that certain companies — probably sizable multinationals that depend on strong search results in the countries in which they are present — will benefit substantially from giving the subject some strategic thought. Similarly, any GILT organization with claims or ambitions to a worldwide service must quickly come to terms with this issue.

The linguistic and cultural demands of this challenge should come as second nature. The technological demands may be more difficult. It appears that as the market matures, there is a real gap here.

I strongly believe that a website should, wherever possible, be built from the ground up with optimization in mind. I also believe that for companies where strong multiregion search results will be important, website builds or re-builds should be done with language versions, localization and regional optimization in mind. At a minimum and even if the organization starts with only one language, an architectural and coding strategy should be selected that will allow the site to be developed along regional, lingual and regional optimization lines. While developing all this might require effort over time, the effort involved in basing the site on the right architectural lines to do this requires a small initial investment.

With every respect to those in our industry already offering this service, we have found in our research that there is a real paucity of effective propositions in this field. Since there is no real learning experience better than doing it yourself, we have begun to learn really fast. For that we have to thank our partners Pull Digital (www.pulldigital.com), who have not only provided expert advice and excellent results, but have contributed significantly to the completion of this article.

<p>www.site.com/default.asp?lang=french</p>	<p>For inbound links from external sites being sent to www.site.com/default.asp, we would get more links, as there is only one site. However, it may be harder to get pages indexed due to the use of parameters. There will also be difficulty in analyzing site traffic.</p>
<p>http://French.site.com/default.asp, or, even better, www.site.fr/default.asp</p>	<p>This URL may be easier to promote locally on a French search engine. More effort is required in linking to this page, however, because it is considered a different site.</p>
<p>www.site.com/french/default.asp</p>	<p>This option might also be worth considering. The French version of the site may inherit some of the reputation of the domain. However, to get the domain promoted to a local French search engine may prove more difficult.</p>

Table 1: Pros and cons of three different options for the French-language side of a two-language site.

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This column is the third in a series on optimizing a localizer's website.

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