The
Definitive Guide to
Website Localization

Contents

Share this guide:

Summary

Today's international trade community is more connected than ever before, which means companies with the right marketing approach have a great chance to expand their business beyond local markets.

Before successfully expanding into a new location, however, companies need to make sure their resources are translated into a market's local language. Few people would argue against the idea that a company's website is a critical component to success in the modern, globalized business world. This is especially true for companies that provide complex products or services, those with target customers all around the world, or for businesses where e-commerce plays a big role. Website Localization – the process of adapting a website into the right language and dialect for a specific country and region – should be considered critical to marketing success for any type of company.

"Website Localization:
the process of adapting a website
into the right language and dialect..."

The process of properly localizing a website is typically very challenging, especially for businesses that are unfamiliar with what is entailed, or unsure of what to expect. This guide to website localization will help provide a broad overview of what localizing a website can include. While every localization process will include some of the steps outlined here, each company's needs and website infrastructure are different so the ultimate process your organization uses will be based on your framework. For a successful website localization project, try to keep all of your core goals in mind as you consider each of the following factors and options.

Define the Project's Scope

The first step in localizing a website is to understand the scope of the project. Collect your team to review the existing sitemap and discuss the platform behind the site to determine at a high level the strategy behind this effort.

- Is the intent to localize the entire site, or just certain parts?

- If you're using a CMS (Content Management System, like WordPress, Joomla, Sitecore, or Drupal), will it easily support publishing and updating the site in multiple languages?

- Make sure your scope analysis includes defining and listing the internal resources available within your company that can contribute to the efforts behind Development/Coding, Design, Writing, Translation, Review, and Testing.

Looking ahead, once the process of localizing the website is complete, what will happen next? Will you be regularly releasing updates on new products or services and new stories, or will the site be mostly static? You have to plan ahead and ensure that the project covers the development of a protocol for consistently localizing any new content as it is produced.

Another part of defining the scope of website localization includes timing. How quickly the overall project needs to be finished will dictate how many teams and individuals will be involved. Make sure that everyone knows what their role is, whether they are working on the design, site development or testing. It is important to be as specific as possible in outlining your goals for localization and how individual team members will contribute to them. If there is some part of the process you are not sure about, don't let it delay your progress; you can always come back to your overall scope and make revisions along the way.

What Are Your Target Markets?

Whether your company will be entering a single new market, or localizing the website for entry into sixteen new markets simultaneously, understanding which languages will be involved is a significant issue.

Your Language Service Provider (LSP) can help you to ensure that the correct written dialects will be used. The difference in target market perception between French for Canada, and French for France can mean the difference between success and failure for your localization efforts in those markets. Other dialect and regional issues to consider include Spanish (for Spain or Latin America), and Traditional vs. Simplified Chinese. Once you've selected your target languages, you can then decide from a navigational standpoint how your audience will select the language to view your site in, unless that process is automated based on geographic location. Any usage of flags or national symbols is not recommended for this. Many companies instead choose to use a "Select Language" pull-down dialog box with the language names localized for this purpose.

Use the Right Tools and Partners to Ensure Existing Web Content is Ready

It's always best to take some time to optimize your existing web content for localization before the process begins. A bit of preparation before you begin the heavy lifting part of your website localization can save you and your team a lot of time and energy. As mentioned previously, your content management system will have a big impact on the project, and sometimes can have a negative impact if the system isn't optimized for localization. When in doubt, make sure to consult with your LSP to ensure that you invest your time and effort in the right platform as early as possible.
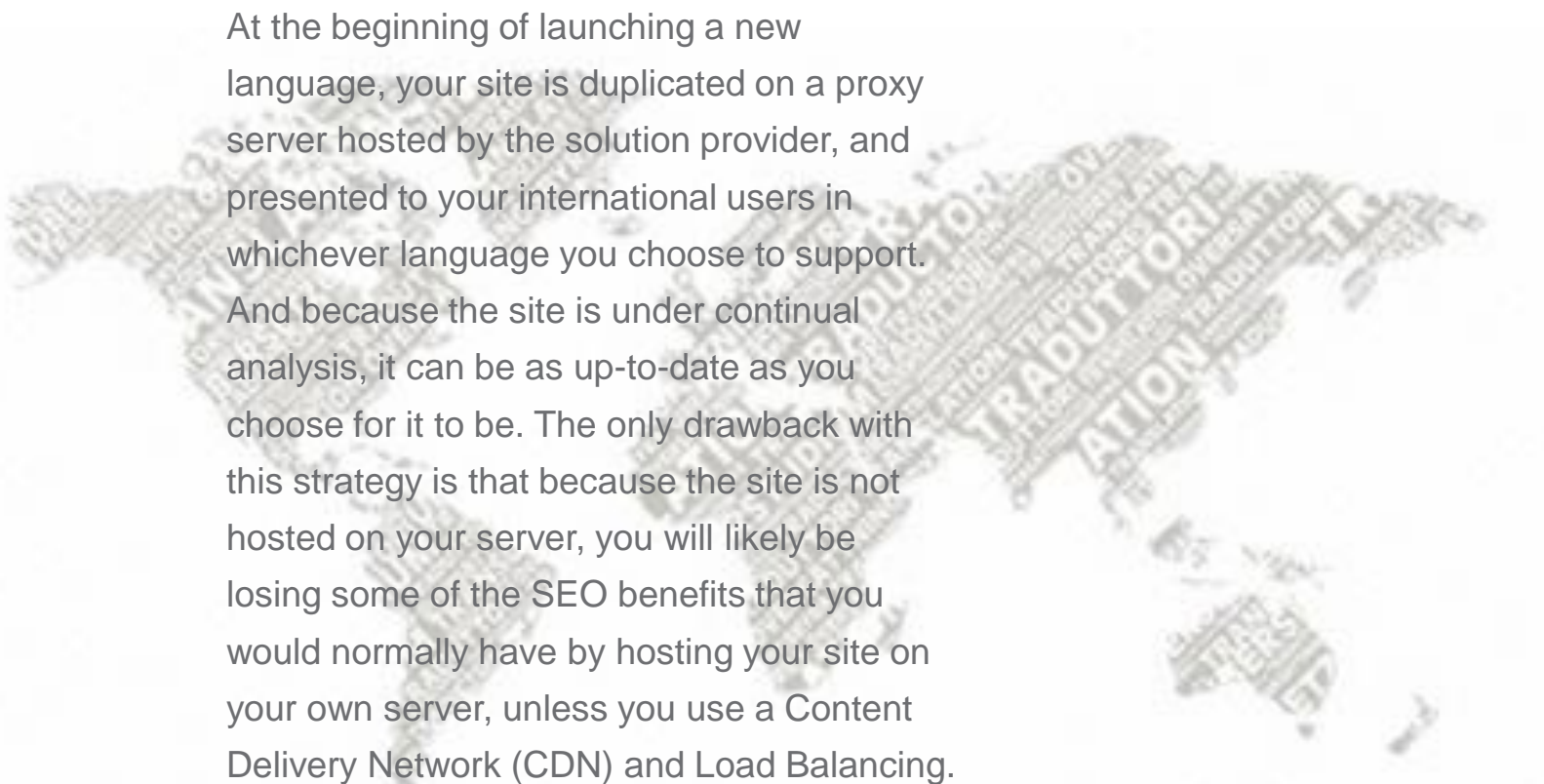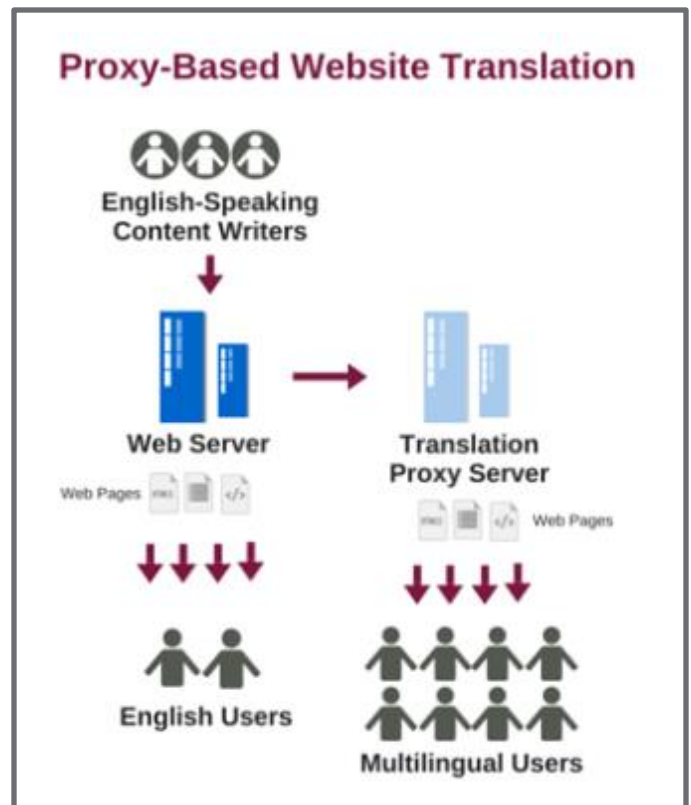
Subdomain vs. Proxy

No matter which CMS you choose, rest assured that there are tools to help optimize the localization process. In particular, we believe that it's worthwhile to investigate software solutions that are integrated with your CMS system, like the solution Dynamic Language has

customized for users of the Sitecore platform, or WordPress platform. The efficiency realized in automating your website's translation process can save you hundreds of hours per year. Plus, integrating the localization solution with your system allows you to use a subdomain for organization of the additional languages you choose to support, through which you'll receive all of the potential SEO benefit.

Another localization option to consider is the hosting strategy known as "Translation Proxy" or "Proxy-Based Website Translation". There are many tools on the market that support this concept, but the overall idea is that through whichever software you choose, your website is analyzed (or "crawled") on a constant basis, letting you and your LSP know which new content you have decided to add or change on your site. Whether on a daily or weekly basis, your team can approve which content should be translated and when, after which, your LSP will be notified and can then follow their normal procedure you've agreed to.

Proxy-Based Website Translation

English-Speaking Content Writers

Web Server

Web Pages

Translation Proxy Server

Web Pages

English Users

Multilingual Users

At the beginning of launching a new language, your site is duplicated on a proxy server hosted by the solution provider, and presented to your international users in whichever language you choose to support. And because the site is under continual analysis, it can be as up-to-date as you choose for it to be. The only drawback with this strategy is that because the site is not hosted on your server, you will likely be losing some of the SEO benefits that you would normally have by hosting your site on your own server, unless you use a Content Delivery Network (CDN) and Load Balancing.

There are some additional ongoing costs to consider with Proxy as well. Since you're not hosting the content, you'll be charged for all of the traffic, in addition to the cost of translating the new content (which you can do in batches to make it as cost effective as possible. On the other hand, there are benefits to Proxy as a solution as well, and the main one is ease of use. The software can work with just about any website, and the cost is relatively low for what you get.

> "There are benefits to Proxy as a solution… the main one is ease of use."

Translation Memory

Proxy can solve many of the technical challenges of website localization and Translation Memory is typically included as part of the solution. In simple terms, the benefit of Translation Memory is the ability to leverage existing translated content on future efforts, saving money and time, and increasing the quality of your content through improved consistency. Typically your LSP expects to take ownership of the task of maintaining and leveraging all of the Translation Memory content. Suffice it to say that whether this is managed by your team, or by your language service provider, it's critical to your localization project's ongoing success.

The benefit of working with a skilled language service provider is that you will get help with the management of translation memory databases, and they can work with your existing glossaries and style guides as they translate your site into different languages. Even if you don't have existing glossaries or translation style guides, a good LSP is experienced at helping you create them, as needed.

It's also best to work with a company that offers skilled and experienced localization engineers who can identify any potential issues with the source code or structure, such as discrepancies with date formats or coded fill-ins. You can create a simple key in the form of a screenshot to help members of the team better understand what these elements will look like in their final form so that there is no confusion during the localization process. Experienced engineers will also be able to help you take advantage of open source international libraries that will make localizing your website easier.

You should also understand your website's structure and try to make sure that it is as suitable as possible for localization. Ideally you can structure your pages in a way that facilitates localization by repeating a similar structure in different areas. For example, if you have several product pages with the same kinds of descriptions that talk about their price, size, weight, and so on, you can benefit from making sure that the content of these descriptions is arranged the same way. The best website structures do this in a way that makes it easier to support many languages at once, because the content is in a familiar form.

Share this guide:

Create the Workflow

Once you know exactly what you plan to accomplish with your website localization, you must consider your method. As an example, let's say your company is a software developer that needs to localize its website for a specific product. If you plan on making frequent updates to the product that you want to reflect on your website, you will most likely want to adopt what is known as an "agile localization process." With this method of localization, instead of completing the entire localization process all at once or after the software's development, you complete it in smaller bursts or sprints.

After every burst there is some analysis done that helps the members of your localization team understand what has been done and what needs to get completed during the next sprint. Agile localization is very desirable for companies that want to localize in conjunction with the development of their content and who want a faster turn-around.

> "Agile localization is very desirable for companies that want to localize in conjunction with the development of their content and who want a faster turn-around."

On the other hand, there are some websites where it makes more sense to complete all of the steps required for localization in a specific order, one after the other. This workflow is commonly known as the "waterfall method." The waterfall method is ideal for more static websites where changes and updates are few and far between. The drawback of waterfall is that it can be challenging to go back and change things once you get close to the end of the process. However, for companies that provide a service, such as advertising agencies or media companies, the waterfall method can be a good fit. Waterfall is also commonly used by manufacturing companies, because these organizations have a standard process in place for production that rarely changes.

Firms like these rarely modify their basic web content, (e.g. descriptions of services offered) barring a website overhaul, and re-writes for such a situation should obviously occur before the localization process begins. Thus, the waterfall method can work very well for these larger "one time" efforts.

Whichever type of workflow you decide to use, make sure that the process is well defined and documented so that team members and outside resources understand their individual goals, roles, and where (and when) they fit into the process.

AGILE   WATERFALL
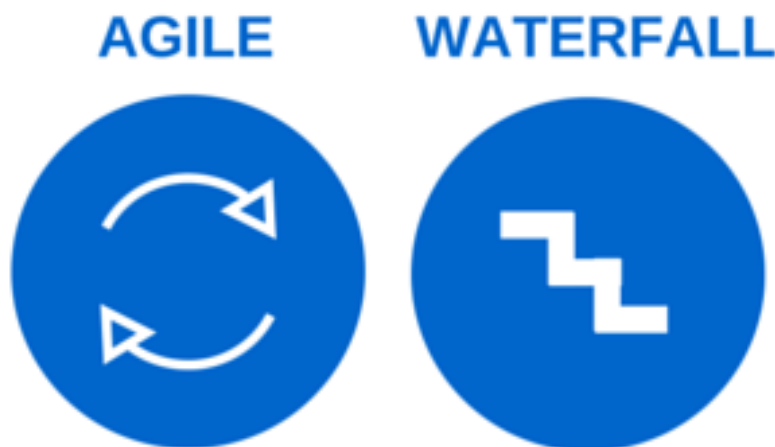
Examine the Layout of the Site

Almost every website is laid out based around the native language in which it was developed. This is the nature of web development, but unfortunately, it can also mean that companies neglect to consider the way their page will look when it is localized for a different market that uses a different language. It is critical that you avoid making this mistake in your localization project as it could lead to difficulties in reading or understanding your page content.

For example, there are layout differences between a language that is written from right to left (like Hebrew or Arabic) and one that is written from left to right. Each culture prefers specific backgrounds and text colors, and you'll also need to account for significant text expansion depending on the market you are localizing your website into.

Languages like German and Russian can be particularly problematic if you don't plan ahead; translations into these languages sometimes create two or three times as much text as the original versions.

> **"Everything from your headers to your keyword usage to your page colors should be considered during the localization process."**

These size differences can make it very tricky if you are trying to align a graphic part of your website with some text that needs to be translated. If you consult with your language service provider ahead of time, they can help you properly plan for text expansion.

You'll also want to be sure that your user interface and website design are culturally appropriate and easy to use for people in the target region.

Be aware of cultural and geopolitical factors, and always avoid flags, maps, and political symbols, as these elements vary from country to country. Imagery and graphics are also important. For example, a company based in North Carolina might feature images of North American people on their main website, however people in other parts of the world might not readily identify with those images as intended. Many localization efforts include new imagery for people, specifically addressing the target audience.

Taking this to the next level, you can also engage with your LSP or a market research firm to survey people that are part of your target audience(s) to ensure that your color and layout selections will be well received.

After conducting a thorough examination of your site, think about what tweaks need to be made and be sure to consider more than just the layout of the text. Are there technical elements of your page that might allow you to rank more highly in search engines in a new market, such as your tagging and code structure? Everything from your headers to your keyword usage to your page colors should be considered during the localization process so you can make sure your complete layout is effectively arranged for content in a different part of the world.

"…be sure to consider more than just the layout of the text."

Share this guide:

Closely Analyze the Page's Content

The first type of content you will need to examine closely during localization is your written content. The words on your website speak volumes about what your company has to offer. During localization, you will want to pay special attention to written content that is more informal or casual in tone. This is where you most frequently find colloquialisms and cultural phrases that are difficult to translate into a new language. This text will require a more creative license to be expressed and adapted to the target culture and language.

A note on Machine Translation (MT):

There are right times and wrong times to utilize this quickly evolving technology, and our opinion is that websites and other marketing tools are the wrong place to implement MT. On the other hand, MT can be very helpful for font testing to ensure that text is displaying correctly on your site.

Content, however, is the heart of your page; it is what promotes and sells your product or service online and provides your visitors with answers to their questions. The unique idiomatic features of each language mean you will have to change content considerably to engage your new audience effectively, using their individual values, humor and cultural background – something you can't achieve via software.

In cases like these, you may want to adopt the transcreation approach to localization, which recreates a phrase or saying in a new language but keeps the meaning the same or as close as possible to its original one.

For a good example of "transcreation", consider how Coca-Cola entered the Chinese market in 1928. Before registering its trademark in China, Coca-Cola found that independent shopkeepers had started creating their own signs designed to emulate the sound of the name "Coca-Cola" in English, without any attention to what these sounds meant in Chinese. This led to some interesting signs that could be translated into phrases like "bite the wax tadpole."

To avoid this problem from happening to your website, keep an eye out for any phrases or sayings that don't make much sense outside of their original language. Also, make sure to focus on text like headers and titles, since they act as anchors of your content that help people understand what they are reading and progress through the content. Anything that plays a prominent role in guiding your visitors to take more action or to visit other parts of your website will need to be localized as effectively as possible. If not, it could turn visitors away or confuse them.

You will also want to spend some time focusing on any audio or video that is included on your website. For video content, you will need to think about what elements of the video may need to be altered. For some videos that have few graphics and feature simple concepts, you may only need to include subtitles on your video to allow users to understand what is being said.

However, if your video is more complex and includes slang, informal language, or cultural references that would be difficult for someone in another part of the world to understand, it may require heavier editing. This applies to both spoken word in your videos as well as any visual elements.

As for audio content, you will need to consider the most effective way to have this translated. There are translation specialists who focus on audio recordings, but it is important that they are able to grasp the concept of your audio content and effectively convert it to a new language.

If you would like any spoken language in the audio or video to be translated or used in subtitles, you will first need to either provide your LSP with the script from the source, or typically they can transcribe the speech into text. This process will require some extra time and resources but will almost always have a lower cost overall when compared to re-producing video content from scratch in multiple languages

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

The process for website localization will also need to address keyword variation for search engine optimization. A single language can have many dialects which increasingly impacts your keyword strategy as Google understands variation and speech-like queries more accurately. From Spanish to French and Chinese to Korean, there are a number of dialect-rich languages, which means you need to consider regional factors in your keyword research. Accents are a stumbling block for international SEO as well. People aren't particularly worried about grammar or spelling when they search and words without accents usually have a higher search volume. One option is to avoid accents in URLs and metadata, with accurate grammar in the main body of content. But this is something your team will have to determine with the help of your LSP.

Relevant, clean links are still important regardless of which language your content adopts. Google is tough on backlinks and the American search provider is number one in every country except five - three of which prefer Bing/Yahoo. The other two nations are Russia and China, where Yandex takes a similarly hardline approach, although Baidu still has some work to do.

bing

Yandex

Google

Consider buying domain names in your new target markets – assuming they're available – which we consider the best overall approach rather than trying to market your company via your original URL. Although it may get expensive if someone already owns the domain, the results from a marketing perspective are almost certainly worth it. The alternatives are subdomains and subdirectories, which are both easier to set up and come with some SEO incentives as well. The downside is that they are not always the best options for user experience, and the benefits of a country-specific URL pay off in the long run.

Search engines are getting smarter all the time and Google can normally see when the same content has multiple audiences. That said, you should still use the rel="alternate" hreflang="x" attributes to tell Google you who your content is targeting - and this page [https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/189077?hl=en] at Google can show you exactly how. Similarly, you shouldn't have any problems with duplicate content if you translate your web copy correctly. Accurate translation changes enough of your content to keep your inbound marketing efforts on the right side of duplication penalties, yet another reason to avoid direct translations.

"…you shouldn't have any problems with duplicate content if you translate your web copy correctly.

Testing the Localized Page

Most people think about testing as something that only happens when a project or product reaches its completion. However, when it comes to localization, your best approach is to test what you can as you go through the process. When you do test your website in its early stages, remember to be sure that you can differentiate between what isn't working because it is "buggy" and what simply has not been completed yet.

For example, once you have a page template, a specific page or set of pages localized, you can have a native speaker test those pages to see whether they discover any problems. For best results, you will want to make sure those who are testing the website have a similar profile to those in your new target market.

Another crucial facet of testing is making sure that you keep strong records of the tests that you run. You need to be able to draw on these tests moving forward to see how the various areas of your site are working. Without a solid understanding of how the different parts of your site perform when they are tested, it will be difficult for your team to know how to make the necessary adjustments. Your testers should be trained in the documentation process so they can provide essential feedback to your localization lead.

Final Words on Website Localization

This guide is just a starting point for companies of any size that are looking to localize their website effectively. Remember that if your process is not identical to the one presented here, it doesn't mean you won't be able to properly localize your website for a new market. By thoroughly planning your website localization strategy, assigning the right team members to the job, and segmenting the project logically, you will set yourself up to successfully reach new customers in the global marketplace.

If you can secure the services of a qualified LSP, you get the benefit of dealing with experienced localization professionals that know what it takes to localize all kinds of business websites. The right LSP will exponentially increase your chances of success by reducing your time to market, helping you avoid obstacles in the website localization process, and making sure that your site connects and engages with a new audience.

Share this guide:

For nearly 30 years, Dynamic Language has provided superior language translation, interpretation and localization services to clients around the world.

Dynamic Language is certified as a woman- and minority-owned business, with an unyielding reputation for delivering exceptional quality projects every time.

We started as a small language service company, but have since grown to become the largest translation company in Seattle and one of the largest language service providers in the United States. We earned our ISO 9001:2008 Quality Management System certification in 2012, to further give our clients the peace of mind they want and need from a language service provider.

We have adapted and grown to constantly meet the needs of our clients and will continue to seek innovative ways to support you. We find our success in yours. We promise to deliver accurate, efficient and cost-effective work on every project.

Whether you need a document translated, an interpreter or are simply looking for options, we are here to help. Contact one of our language service consultants to get started today!

Via Phone
Translation: 206.493.1635
Interpretation: 206.244.6709
Toll Free: 800.682.8242

www.dynamiclanguage.com
sales@dynamiclanguage.com

Follow Us: