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Global Search Engine Optimisation

How to speak the language of International SEO

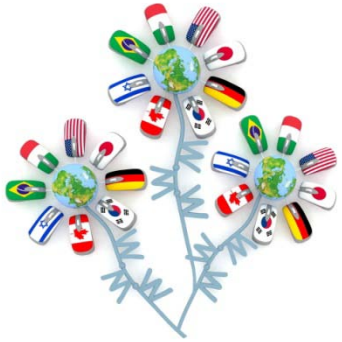
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Social Media Marketing . International SEO . Web Design
Ecommerce . Web Analytics . Email Marketing

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International Search Engine Optimisation

Improving the search engine rankings of global or multilingual websites

International Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is an essential part of the marketing mix for any company that trades overseas – or hopes to expand into foreign markets in the future.

The benefits of an effective International SEO campaign are self evident: Increasing visibility in the search engines results in more traffic to your website, which leads to more qualified visitors making enquiries or sales on your website, which in turn generates more business and increases revenue.

The process of search engine optimisation requires at its core a solid understanding of your target market, their Internet behaviour, and your key marketing messages.

Hallam Communications are specialist providers of Internet Marketing services, with experience of delivering successful International Search Engine Optimisation campaigns.

We prepared this document as a service for EMITA: The East Midlands Trade Association

I'd like to thank Katie Saxon for writing up this document, and I hope you find this White Paper helpful in developing your own international SEO campaign. If you need any assistance please feel free to get in touch to discuss your requirements.

Susan Hallam
Managing Director

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International search

The challenges of introducing a new international site extend beyond the logistics of creating new web content. While the internet is a global space, different nationalities behave in different ways online. Smart businesses need to understand their target markets, and that begins by understanding international search.

Google is undoubtedly the dominant search engine in the UK market with roughly 90% of all searches taking place on a Google platform, but this is not true for every country. For countries such as China, Russia and Japan, Google's market share is well below 50%. Dominant search players in these countries include Yandex in Russia (which has up to 60% of the Russian search market), or Baidu in China.

Even if Google is the market leader in your target country, local searchers may use the search engine differently to UK audiences. Google updated its search interface in May 2010 to include a new column on the left enabling searchers to refine their search strategy in terms of content type (Images, Books, Video, etc) . This now includes an option to select country specific options.

For example, a searcher in Germany using www.google.de may choose to view:

1. "Seiten auf Deutsch" – pages in the German language, whether they are aimed specifically to visitors in Germany or not.
2. "Seiten aus Deutschland" – pages from Germany, that is, pages from websites that Google considers to be from, and for, audiences in Germany only.

Currently, around 10% of users will refine their search by country, and 10-15% of users refine their search by language.



Resources:

www.baidu.com

www.yandex.ru

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Google's free online language translate service instantly translates text and web pages.

It is an automated machine translation, and whilst useful for instant translations to get the gist of a webpage, it can generate complete gibberish and is not suitable for localising websites.

International SEO isn't as simple as translation

The most effective way to target a website for local audiences in a global website is to create country and/or language specific pages. Depending on the size and scope of a site this may range from a few localised pages to versions of an entire website with focussed local content.

Localisation isn't as simple as translating the page into another language. Prospective customers in different countries have different expectations and different behaviours and this will be reflected in both their searching and browsing behaviour. Foreign visitors will respond to different signals, have different needs, and ask different questions.

It is vitally important, therefore, for businesses to research every target country thoroughly. They should use native speakers of a language to carry out keyword research. It may also be wise to use native speakers to produce copy and content for your localised pages.

A Spanish landing page may initially interest Spanish-speaking customers, but if the rest of the website is in English this targeted offering may be wasted.

There may also be legal or administrative issues that apply in overseas markets that are irrelevant in the UK. Before redeveloping a site for foreign audiences, businesses must understand any legal obligations that they will face. This may be as simple as needing a French postal address to register a .fr domain or as complicated as rules surrounding blogging and online PR in the USA.

Businesses deciding to recreate their entire sites for local markets will also need to review their sites before starting any international optimisation. Any problems with the original site will get much worse as it is replicated or redeveloped for new markets.

Multi-regional vs multilingual websites

How are you going to target your customers, how are you going to present your information, and how are you going to organise your content?

One of the first steps in international SEO is to identify what type of website you need to provide for your customer base:

1. **Multi-regional** sites target users in different countries who all speak the same language.
   E.g. UK, USA and Australia.

2. **Multilingual sites** target users in different countries who speak different languages to the users in other targeted countries.
   E.g. UK, Germany and France.

3. **Multi-regional and multilingual sites** target users in different countries who speak the same language as users in some, but not all, other targeted countries.
   E.g. UK, USA, Germany, Austria, France and Switzerland.

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Structuring URLs for global sites

Country & Language Codes

uk – country code for the UK
en – language code for English
fr – country/language code for France/French
ca – country code for Canada

Whether a site is multilingual or multi-regional, webmaster will need to choose one method for separating the different versions of a website. There are three choices advocated by Google: domain names, subdomains, and folders.

1. Buy and use a Country-Code Top Level Domain Name (ccTLD). This is a domain name tied to a specific country – .au is the ccTLD for Australia. E.g. **http://www.example.au**

2. Use a `Generic Top Level Domain Name` (gTLD) that does signify any particular country, for example .com or .info or the new .co top level domains. Combine the gTLD with a country specific subdomain, e.g. **http://uk.example.com** or a language specific subdomain for example **http://en.example.com** which would be appropriate for any English speaking visitor.

3. Use a gTLD with a country or language specific subdirectory, e.g. **http://www.example.com/uk**

In many ways the decision of how to structure URLs is purely academic. As long as a logical structure is chosen and used consistently, businesses are unlikely to see major negative impacts on their optimisation efforts purely as a result of their URL structure.

Indeed, there are other, more sophisticated signals that are used by search engines when encountering geotargeting or language targeting (targeting searchers by language).

Tip:

There are strict rules governing the availability of country code top level domains.

Learn more at
http://www.eurodns.com/

For example, to be eligible to the registration of a .FR domain name, applicant must meet one of the following criteria:
- be a company registered under French Law; or
- be a French resident aged of at least 18 years; or
- hold a registered Trademark covering the French territory ; or
- be a French citizen living abroad.

In addition to one of the above, the applicant must appoint an administrative contact located and reachable in France.

Country Code Top Level Domain Name (ccTLD)

The ccTLD is an effective method of geotargeting, or targeting searchers by location. Historically, ccTLD have been two letter such as jp (Japan) or de (Germany).

The use of ccTLDs is strongly recommended by experts as the preferred method for optimising global websites.

This is why big sites such as Amazon make use of ccTLD in their localisation strategies. The sites http://www.amazon.co.uk/ and http://www.amazon.fr/ not only use different languages and currencies, but also group their products differently and show them in different orders and with different offers.

Internationalised Domain Names (IDNs) are domain names represented by local language characters. Such domain names could contain letters or characters from non-ASCII scripts (for example, Arabic or Chinese). Many efforts are ongoing in the Internet community to make domain names available in character sets other than ASCII.

The rules for registering an IDN will vary from country to country**,** and the roll out of IDNs is currently in progress. More information can be found on the ICANN website.

Advantages of ccTLDs:

- Users trust that a site bearing their country domain will display information that is relevant to their country.
- Strongest geotargeting signal used by Google
- Easy separation of sites
- Server location is less relevant as a geo-targeting factor

Disadvantages of ccTLDS:

- Some ccTLDs have strict conditions imposed on their use and are not available to all businesses. (This may be a benefit to businesses that can use the ccTLD as it reinforces trust.)
- More expensive, and
- Subject to availability
- More demands on infrastructure
- Link building may be harder as each country or language has a totally separate site, with less overall domain authority
- Has the potential to cause issues with duplicate content if geo-targeting methods are not used effectively across all domains
- Generally speaking .com domains are thought to outrank .co.uk domains for English content

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Tip

Google considers subdomains to be a completely different website. This can have significant advantages, as well as disadvantages.

Subdomains

Using a general top level domain name with different subdomains to create totally separate websites. This method of organising local information is used by Wikipedia, e.g. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page and http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page

Pros

- Easy to set up
- Allows different subdomains to be hosted on different servers in different countries (which may help geo-targeting)
- Sites can be easily separated
- Effective way to establish sites as separate identities while still retaining the overall corporate branding.
- Able to target different languages used in one country in conjunction with subdirectories, e.g. **http://ca.example.com/fr and http://ca.example.com/en**

Cons

- While this allows users to see at a glance where they are on a page, they might not recognise geo-targeting from the URL alone, as they would with a ccTLD.
- Treated more as separate sites by search engines – although links between subdomains do not generally carry as much authority as external links. This does mean that each subdomain will need a separate link building campaign.
- Unclear what should be included on the **http://www.example.com homepage**.

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Subdirectories

Subdirectories are the simplest way of organising content, as all subdirectories are usually stored in on the same web hosting platform.

Sites like Ryanair use subdirectories for both language and country

http://www.ryanair.com/fr	For the French speaking market
http://www.ryanair.com/ie	English content for the Irish market
http://www.ryanair.com/lt	English for the Lithuanian market
http://www.ryanair.com/en	English content for the UK.

Pros

- Easy to set up
- Low maintenance – as files are usually on a single server
- All links point to one domain, which then has greater authority and a higher Page Rank
- Good way to target multiple languages in a single country

Cons

- Harder for users to recognise geotargeting from the URL alone
- A single server location is a missed geotargeting opportunity
- Difficult to separate sites, as all targeted information is part of a single website
- Searchers, especially European searchers, often favour ccTLDs and prefer to click on these domains
- Unclear what should be included on the **http://www.example.com homepage**.

Tip:

Use separate URLs for the content for different countries or languages. Using cookies to show translated or localised versions of websites is problematic: they are difficult for search engines to index and will not work effectively if a searcher has disabled their cookies

Dynamic URLs and International SEO

Some businesses have websites that use URL parameters to serve different results to different consumers. For example:
http://www.example.com?loc=uk or **http://www.example.com?country=france**.

Google specifically advises against this technique, and existing websites that operate using URL parameters should be reviewed before any international optimisation work is carried out. There are several reasons for this:

- Google finds it difficult to segment websites based on the URL and does not allow geotargeting using Webmaster Tools with this method
- It is hard for users to recognise a website as being targeted specifically to their country from the URL alone
- There are missed opportunities to create keyword-rich URLs

When embarking on a standard SEO campaign, it is best practice to ensure that URLs include keywords. This is both a signal to search engines, and is more helpful to human visitors.

When undertaking an international SEO strategy the same is true. Keyword-rich URLs in the appropriate language are likely to be preferred by search engines and served higher in the Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs). URL parameters do not allow for keyword-rich URLs and alterations to the site architecture should be made to change this.

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Tip

Remember that search engines can't read the text displayed in images.

Combining country and language codes, or subdomains and subdirectories

One interesting aspect of international SEO is when you have one country speaking several languages (for example Switzerland or Canada)

There are a number of different and equally valid ways of organising the pages on your website.

Content could be targeted for either French or English speaking Canadians using subdomains and folders. In this example all content is suitable for any visitor

http://ca.example.com or http://www.example.com/ca/

Or to target English speaking Canadians, you use a combination of subdomains and folders:

http://ca.example.com/en/ or **http://www.example.com/ca/en/** for English speakers in Canada - likewise, for French speaking Canadians, use structures like these:

http://ca.example.com/fr/ or **http://www.example.com/ca/fr/** for French speakers in Canada

8 Tips for geotargeting and multi-regional websites

For multi-regional websites, geotargeting will have a major impact on successful local optimisation. Geo-targeting allows businesses to direct pages or websites towards users in specific locations.

Sites that use geotargeting effective are more likely to see their sites rank highly in SERPs – for both general web searches and when filters are used when searching for either language or country origination content. They also have fewer issues with duplicate content, as this technique indicates which pages are intended for which recipients.

Here are eight of the factors that influence geo-targeting in relative order of importance:

1. Using a ccTLD
2. Using the local language – including relevant spelling and grammar variations
3. Geo-targeting on Google's Webmaster Tools
4. Server location is a factor; ideally a website should be hosted near to its users.
5. Building local links to each targeted website.
6. Local addresses and phone numbers using a local area code can help
7. Meta Tags may have an impact on localised search results.
8. Google Local listings

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Geotargeting: ccTLDs

Google makes it clear that they see this as one of, if not the, most important factors for localised search results.

Most experts agree that Internet users see ccTLDs as being the most relevant to their location. The trust that users have in ccTLDs means that they often rank higher, have higher click through rates and better conversion rates.

Potentially it is easier to generate locally targeted links to another ccTLD than to a .com address. So, while it might be harder to establish domain authority quickly across several ccTLDs than a single domain, the links are likely to be more valuable for geo-targeting.

Andy Atkins Krüger, International SEO expert, also suggests two more benefits:

- Links between pages hosted on separate domain names are classed as external links and so may carry more authority than internal links.
- In his experience, ccTLDs have more stability in the SERPs and are less affected by changes to algorithm changes by the search engines than gTLDs.

Geotargeting: Language

There are some languages that are only used in one country – for example while there may be Italian speakers around the world, Italy is the only country where this is an official language. Ensuring the website is written in the language of the chosen region aids geotargeting.

Even if a language is spoken in more than one country, using the local dialect may help your localised targeting.

Geotargeting: Google Webmaster Tools

For companies that are unable to use a ccTLD for their domain, Google offers geo-targeting capabilities through their Webmaster Tools.

Using the Webmaster Tools, it is possible to set the "Geographic Target" for each subdomain and/or subdirectory on a website. So either http://fr.example.com/ or http://www.example.com/fr can be set to geotarget France.

NB: Every subdomain and/or subdirectory needs to be set up as a separate website in Webmaster Tools to enable this feature. If the website as a whole, say http://www.example.com/ is set up as the website, any geographical targeting will apply to all subdirectories on the site.

To set this target simply log into Webmaster Tools and choose the appropriate website. Find the "Settings" tab in "Site Configuration" and click into the "Geographic Target" section. Then simply select the chosen region from the list of countries.

If a website is Multilingual and not attempting to localise information, the geo-targeting tool should be set to "Unlisted." This means the French content on a site can be shown in any French-speaking area - although, if searchers are using the "Pages from" radio button, the website may miss out on traffic.

Google considers this as one of the strongest localisation factors as webmasters have to deliberately set their Geographic location. At present Yahoo and Bing do not offer the ability to specify target location in their Webmaster Tools.

Local hosting

It is generally agreed that hosting websites in the target county plays a key role in international SEO. This should boost the presence of a website in the SERPs, particularly when searchers use the "Pages from" option to narrow their search.

Some experts believe that local hosting for each version of a company website can also increase the value of links passed between sites.

Local links

As with standard SEO, it is important to build relevant links to company sites. As the goal of international search engine optimisation is to establish each site as being relevant to a specific country, links from local sites are essential.

A German website selling computers in Germany is expected to have a link profile that includes technology magazines, review sites and relevant businesses that are all based in Germany. Any businesses wishing to promote the German offering on their global computer ecommerce site as being specifically for Germany needs to work to create a similar localised link profile.

Use of a ccTLD may make it easier for sites to generate quality local links, due to greater trust in the country-specific domain.

Street address and local telephone numbers

When establishing the location of a business, Google refers to the information contained in their website about their physical street address. Use of a phone number with a local area code and a local post code are clues to the company's location.

Metadata

There are two ways in which metadata can have an effect on international SEO:

- Localised information in your Meta Description and Meta Keywords assists with language recognition and geotargeting
- Appropriate country and language Meta Tags can help your page to rank well in the SERPs

Google has made it clear that they do not use the country and language Meta Tags in localised search algorithms. This is because they are often automatically generated by computers and so are not a true indication of location – they prefer to use geotargeting details from their Webmaster Tools.

Yahoo and Bing, on the other hand, do still use these Meta Tags in their algorithms, and they can have a dramatic effect on rankings.

The "lang" Meta Tag can be used when coding a document to indicate both the target language and country in one of two ways:

1. Via HTML, sometimes considered to be the most helpful to search enginge:
   <html lang="fr-ca">
2. Via XHMTL:
   <html xmlns="http://www.w3.org/1999/xhtml" xml:lang="fr-ca" />

In this case “fr” indicates that the language is French, where the “ca” indicates it is for a Canadian audience. If a company were to creating a multilingual site without Multi-regional targeting then only the language code is needed, e.g. <html lang="fr"> for French-speakers globally.

Google Places listing

This is an important consideration for local search engine optimisation within the UK and the same principles can be applied when carrying out international SEO.

All businesses should claim or create their listing in Google Places. They should ensure that business addresses, local phone numbers and links to the appropriate regional websites are present and correct.

Creating successful multilingual content

Many users will prioritise the ability to use a website in their own language over and above other factors – e.g. price – when making buying decisions. To successfully attract international customers it is therefore essential to provide the audience with content in their own language.

Considerations for businesses using linguistic targeting:

- Google advises that automatically translated pages should not be included in their index, because the quality is not sufficiently reliable as to warrant inclusion.

- Automatic translations are not generally successful and often texts are translated literally so the meaning of the document is lost. If a visitor cannot understand a website, or it sounds unnatural, they are unlikely to become a customer. Likewise, poor translations will lead to poorly optimised text.

- There are also some languages that search engines cannot easily distinguish between. If content has been automatically translated, there is a risk that the search engine will mistake it for another language and fail to serve it in the appropriate SERPs.

- Only use one language on each page of your site – the navigation, headers and content should all be in the same language.

- Link to the same content in other languages on your sites
  E.g. A German user may accidentally land on the page:
  http://uk.example.com/Clothing

A link to the German version of this page http://de.example.com/Kleidung should be included so that the visitor can access the same information in their native language.

- Do not automatically serve pages in different languages based on a user's location. There may be an English-speaking user in another country who intended to go direct to the English content of a website.

- Use UTF-8 coding (Unicode) when non-English characters, e.g. é or ü, are needed in an URL which you are linking to on your pages. These special characters may help with geotargeting if the language they are used in is only spoken in one country.

  UTF-8 is standard coding that ensures that all search engines can understand special characters. This is the only coding that Google uses – it converts all other coding to UTF-8 for processing, which may result in translation errors. By working in Unicode in the first place, the risk of Google misunderstanding a site is greatly reduced.

  For example:
  An English page:
  http://en.example.com/coffee.html

  In French becomes:
  http://fr.example.com/café.html

  As this URL contains the special character é, it needs to be encoded so the URL looks like this:
  http://fr.example.com/caf%C3%A9.html

"Two countries divided by a common language"

George Bernard Shaw

NB: It will not always be necessary to use special characters in URLs. Languages such as German have alternative spellings that can replace these characters. E.g. Computerzubehör and Computerzubehoer are two spellings of the same word – for computer accessories.

- Language targeting can be a sophisticated method of geo-targeting, even if the intended market contains two countries that use the same language. Using localised spellings, language variations and grammatical structure can help to establish which country a website is intended for.

  For example, a company may wish to establish separate sites for the USA and the UK, and should use appropriate local language variations: sneakers or trainers, jewelry or jewellery, "I have no clue" or "I have no idea"

- Make sure that Meta Tags are localised based on the keyword research carried out by a native speaker of the chosen language. Simply translating Title Tags, Meta Descriptions and Meta Keywords will not provide well-optimised pages for the chosen overseas market.

Note on duplicate content and global sites

Google is renowned for penalising websites for using duplicate content (either across a single site or using the same content on more than one website).

However, Google states that:

"The same content in different languages is not considered duplicate content."

So, content in French, German and English will not be treated as duplicate, even if the content is essentially identical.

And, as a general rule, content on different URLs is not considered to be a copy if it is intended for audiences in different countries. However, while Google accepts that this content will be similar, they do still advocate providing unique content for each site.

For example http://uk.example.com, http://us.example.com and http://au.example.com will all have similar content. But, the primary benefit to creating different sites for the UK, USA and Australia is the ability to tailor the content to the market, so they should not be identical.

While broadly speaking the three sites will contain the same information, it is expected that they would contain different local references. They may promote different products, use different spelling and slang and offer products in different currencies.

It is worth noting that companies should avoid using the exact same words in the same groups (phrases or sentences) but in a different order across multiple pages. Simply rearranging the benefits of a product or service from one country page to another will not stop the two pages being treated as identical.

Content should be reworked so it appeals to the different audiences. Each of these three sites would be designed to appeal to a specific target market and should not be carbon copies of each other.

If your geo-targeting is working well, there should be sufficient signals for search engines to serve the correct version of a website to users in the appropriate country.

However, there may be times when a company website encounters penalties from Google (either only 1 page is indexed, or in the worst case scenario the sites are removed from the index altogether). In these cases, there are some steps that may help companies:

- Ensure that suppliers' product descriptions are never taken verbatim. They should always be rewritten for a company's own clients – ideally with variations for clients in each regional market too.

- Ensure that search engines are only able to access products via one route.

  For example a visitor may be able to find a small blue shirt on a website using tags for size, colour and product type. If search engines can find this same shirt via all three routes they will make three copies of a single page, which will then be considered duplicate content.

  A main route to products should be chosen for search engines, e.g. product type, and the other tags should be marked with a "nofollow" tag to block access to search engines.

- Using a ccTLD does help to ensure the right users view the right content. If two websites look similar and one has a .co.uk domain and the other a .au domain, the .co.uk version is usually served to visitors from the UK.

- In extreme cases it may be necessary to block some of the "duplicate" pages from the search engines. This is far from ideal, and Google advises against this. However, if product information and pricing does not change across the pages and at least one form of the content has a good ranking it may be necessary.

The principles of **good Internet Marketing and local Search Engine Optimisation** have a lot in common with good business practices when trading overseas:

- Get to know your customers and the foreign market.
- Target each market with tailored products and information.
- Decide on your goals and develop a strategy that will help you to achieve them

Hallam is a Nottingham-based SEO consultancy offering advice on Internet Marketing, creating digital strategies and delivering search engine optimisation services.

Resources

Google Webmaster Tools: http://www.google.com/webmasters/
Country Code Top Level Domains: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Country_code_top-level_domain
Language Codes: http://www.mcanerin.com/en/articles/meta-language.asp
URL Encoder: http://meyerweb.com/eric/tools/dencoder/

Sources

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