

Constructing a Globalized E-Commerce Site

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional boundaries and marketplace definitions are fast becoming irrelevant due to globalization. According to recent statistics, there are approximately 208 million English speakers and 608 million non-English speakers online, and 64.2% of Web users speak a native language other than English (Global Reach, 2004). The world outside of English-speaking countries is obviously coming online fast. As with activities such as TV, radio and print, people surf in their own language. A single-language Web site simply could not provide good visibility and accessibility in this age of globalize Internet. In this article, we will focus on the approaches in the construction of an effective globalized e-commerce Web site.

A SHORT TOUR OF E-COMMERCE SITES

The 1990s was a period of spectacular growth in the United States (U.S.). The commercialization of the Internet spawned a new type of company without a storefront and who existed only in cyberspace. They became the darlings of the new economy, and traditional brick-and-mortar retailers have been scoffed off as part of the old economy. Of course, this irrational exuberance is hampered with a heavy dose of reality with the dot.com bust in 2000. Yet, the trends initiated by the dot.com start-ups; that is, conducting commerce electronically, are mimicked by traditional businesses. The Internet is a haven, and imperative for commerce. And, not only for business-to-consumer transactions; business-to-business applications are also becoming more popular.

While there are endless possibilities for products and services on the Internet, e-commerce sites can be classified into a few broad categories: brochure, content, account and transaction sites. Both brochure and content sites provide useful information for customers. A brochure site is an electronic version

of a printed brochure. It provides information about the company and its products and services, where contents tend to be very static. A content site generates revenue by selling advertisement on the site. It attracts and maintains traffic by offering unique information, and content must be dynamic and updated regularly. An account site allows customers to manage their account; for example, make address changes. A transaction site enables customers to conduct business transactions; for example, ordering a product. Unlike brochure and content sites, security safeguards such as password validation and data encryption are mandatory. Typical e-commerce sites today are multidimensional. For example, a mutual fund company's site provides company information and current market news, but it also allows customers to change account information and sell and buy funds.

A STANDARD SITE CONSTRUCTION METHODOLOGY

Over the past decade, e-commerce site development methodology has become standardized following the model of system development life cycle, with activities including planning, analysis, design, implementation and support. Launching a business on the Internet requires careful planning and strategizing. Planning requires coming up with a vision and a business plan, defining target audiences and setting both short- and long-range goals. Analysis means defining requirements and exploring and understanding the problem domain to determine the site's purpose and functionality. Design requires selecting hardware and software, and determining site structure, navigation, layout and security issues. Implementation means building the site and placing it on the Internet. Support requires maintaining the site, supporting its customers and conducting periodic upgrades to improve its performance and usability.

A successful globalize e-commerce site must strike a balance between the need for uniformity and accommodating variations. While most contents are identical (though they may be presented in different languages), some content inevitably varies and only is relevant for the locals. A site with a globalize reach must be adapted for both localization and optimization. While there are many issues to consider in the construction of an e-commerce site, our primary focus here deals with aspects particularly relevant to a globalize site, including issues of site specification, customer research and branding, site structure, navigation and search engine optimization.

Site Specification and Functionality

It is very easy to confuse an e-commerce site with the corporation. An inescapable truth, the corporation owns its Web site. The corporation also handles legal, marketing, public relationships, human resources and many other matters associated with running a business. It is important to understand that the site serves a business, and not the other way around (Miletsky, 2002). All corporations have a mission statement and associated strategies. A site exists to serve the corporation, and the site's functionality should reflect this reality. Therefore, it is important to ask: How could the site help the corporation in the execution of its business plan?

Globalization may increase a corporation's market and nurture opportunities, but it may not be for everyone. What role is the globalize e-commerce site playing? Could the corporation's product or service have market potential in other countries? While globalization creates new opportunities, it also invites new competition. A corporation naturally has an idea of local competitors. Before globalizing, know the competitors in the international market. Because competition may vary from country to country, functions and priorities of the site need to adjust accordingly. For the same corporation and same product, approaches may need to vary for different localities. Given the inevitability of globalization, internationalizing the corporate e-commerce site may be a necessary defensive against competitors making inroads into one's market.

Understand One's Customers

With hundreds of thousands of e-commerce sites to visit, customers are faced with more choices than ever. The vast amount of information found on the Internet is daunting, not only to the shoppers but to corporations, as well. What do users want when they come to the site? Are they individual consumers, commercial businesses or government agencies? The clients access the site for information. But, do they perform sales online, and what about exchanges and returns? How are they able to perform these functions from the site? What are the implications for multicultural users? What technologies will be needed on the site to support these functions?

The cardinal rule in building a functional site is to understand its users. However, the same site operating in different countries may target different audiences. For example, teenagers in the U.S. may have more discretionary spending than their European or Asian counterparts. A sport sneaker site targeting teenagers in the U.S. may target adults in another country. The per capita income of a particular region will definitely affect sales potential and project feasibility. On the other hand, the same target in a different country may also have different needs. Site planners must consider the daily functions and preferences of the local customers and organize sites to support those functions (Red, 2002). For example, while Web sites are becoming major portals for information distribution, many Asian cultures value personal contact. It is important to provide contact phone numbers instead of business downloads for a personal touch, or it could be viewed as rude and impolite.

A large part of building a successful e-commerce site is being aware of the ways in which customers reach you, which pages are most popular, and what sticky features are most effective. Partnerships with other e-businesses can also help attract new customers. Local sites in different countries also need to be accessible to each other. How will the partner and local sites be linked together? For customers unfamiliar with the site, will they know what the corporation offers, and be able to find the things they need? When developing a local site, the original home site can only be used as a reference. The site must localize properly. A key activity is to inventory all information local customers need and want to access. Next, consider

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