Chapter XV
Challenges in Building a Culture–Centric Web Site

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the challenges in constructing a culture-centric Web site. The Internet has expanded business opportunities into global marketplaces that were virtually unreachable in the past. With business Web sites reaching international audiences, cultural differences are an important issue in interface design. Global Web sites must be culture-centric, taking into account the attitude, technology, language, communication, sensibility, symbolism, and interface usability of targeted communities. Site design and development also should follow the Unicode standard for multilingual support with implementation done on UTF-8-enabled operating systems and applications. Globalization has led many people to become more sensitive to cultural diversity. The author hopes that understanding and awareness of international user needs, limitations, and expectations will lead to global Web sites with improved usability and sensitivity.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has revolutionized international business and global marketing. Roughly speaking, the Internet is a network of computers interconnected throughout the world and operating on a standard protocol that allows data to be transmitted. Until the early 1990s, the Internet was primarily the

domain of the military and academia. The development of new software and technologies turned the Internet (Net) into a commercial medium that has transformed businesses worldwide. There is a strong international market, and businesses are taking note. From 106.4 million online buyers worldwide in 2000, the number is expected to hit 464.1 million by 2006 (Campanelli, 2004). Along with incorporating user-centric design, a business Web site must be culture-centric. A U.S. Web site designer must understand that international users' needs and expectations may be different than U.S. users. Differences in cultural attitudes, technological limitations, linguistics, communication, aesthetic sensibility, symbolism, and interface usability all must be well thought out. Furthermore, the computer platforms also must have multilingual supports.

BACKGROUND

Constructing successful global Web sites involves three knowledge domains: business operation, technical standard, and interface design. Business issues facing global e-commerce operations are abundant. Chun, Honda, and Schwane (2005) show that these issues include logistics and distribution, financial and technological infrastructures, legal frameworks, and strategic business alliances. The technical standard domain deals with issues such as HTML, Unicode, character set, operating system, application, and browser supports; these are prerequisites for proper multilingual content implementation. This article focuses on both technical standard and interface design issues for global Web sites.

Research in user interface design has been centered on layout, navigation, and performance issues (Lynch & Horton, 1999, Spool, Scanlon, Schroeder, Snyder, & DeAngelo, 1999). While the research provides good guidance for page design, it does not address global site design issues. Scheiderman (1998) proposed a universal accessibility concept that addresses user diversity. Marcus and Gould (2000) studied interface design in terms of cultural perception of information content, images, icons, and symbolism. Huang and Tilley (2001) examined content and structure challenges associated with multilingual Web sites. These research efforts provided a glimpse at both the complexity and opportunity associated with Web usability design in a global economy. The research is still in its early stages, and more investigations are needed on usability, cultural, and linguistic issues.

THE DIGITAL AND CULTURAL DIVIDES

The term *digital divide* traditionally has described inequalities in access to technology among social or cultural groups. Although there has been a huge increase in Net speed in the industrialized world, the trend is not global. A recent survey revealed about 36 million broadband lines in the U.S. compared to 295,000 in India (Point Topic, 2005), and India is a high-tech powerhouse with a population 30 times that of the US. Many international users also use older technologies (including older computers and browsers) or lack items such as video and sound cards. Net access is only one aspect of the digital divide. The quality of connections and auxiliary services, the processing speed and the capabilities of the computer used, along with many other technical factors are also important issues (Davison & Cotton, 2003). Designers who ignore users' technological capabilities by creating sites that must be viewed with the latest technologies or with the fast connections are dooming their projects from the outset.

Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes members of one group from another group. It is also the set of values and attributes of a given group (Hofstede, 1997). The Internet is a new medium, and in a survey as recent as five years ago (Walsh, McQuivey, & Wake-

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