

SERVICE DESIGN VIA THE GLOBAL WEB: GLOBAL COMPANIES SERVING LOCAL MARKETS

For international companies, the Internet is an essential but inherently complex interface. In the framework presented here, Brian Gillespie critiques a range of options related to gateways, scope, user research, uniform versus local presence, language, content development, design, site implementation, domains, and URLs. It is an enlightening overview for both executives and managers.

A few years back, a colleague of mine was doing research on global brands. In the course of interviewing a senior marketing manager at Microsoft, he raised the topic of the company's global web presence. The manager mentioned that Microsoft had 180 websites worldwide, of which he absolutely knew around two-thirds to be "on-brand." He was relatively satisfied with this state of affairs. After all, it had been and could still be a lot worse. Today, I expect that manager has made sure that all Microsoft sites are on-brand, but the issue at the core of his observation-the difficulty of maintaining a consistently on-brand web presence-is something that many global businesses struggle with.

The challenge is not simply a global website design and branding issue; it's much larger than that. It's about how companies approach the globalization of their businesses and brands, and the tangible manifestations of their business and brand as experienced by different markets throughout the world. Often, the crux of the matter has to do with how global a company actually wants to be. How a company positions itself-as a national company operating in foreign markets or a global company operating in local markets-will have a big impact on its globalization strategy. There is a spectrum to globalization, the range of which can be seen in how the balance tips between the desire for uniformity and the desire for diversity, between international and national, between strict standards and looser guidelines that companies may choose to adopt. Where a company fits within this spectrum is often determined by the very nature of the business itself.

Before launching a global web presence, a senior manager has to answer the basic question of what globalization means for his or her company. Does the company possess a uniform global persona, or a diverse persona that means different things to different people? How can the company balance catering to the diversity of markets with desires for consistent application of the brand and corporate persona? What shape of web architecture best reflects not just the brand architecture, but also the expectations of web audiences worldwide? All

these decisions have ramifications for marketing and design teams tasked with implementing a globalization strategy.

As the role of the web in servicing the needs of customers throughout the customer lifecycle grows with each passing year, managing the design of online services becomes a critical task. This paper provides a broad overview of the challenges that companies face when launching a global web presence aimed at servicing current and future customers, including issues that affect the design and branding decisions that must be made along the way. It also offers practical suggestions and strategies for overcoming these challenges.

The scope of globalization

One of the many problems companies encounter when launching a global web presence is the issue of scope. How extensive should web-based services be? Many websites are designed with a closed-loop marketing approach; they are meant to attract, convert, and retain prospects and customers. Attracting prospects can be accomplished through a basic, information-based site that is optimized for search and contains content clearly written for target audiences. Adding transactional capabilities, such as product/service selectors, contact forms, and e-commerce, provides opportunities to convert those prospects into paying customers. The implementation of added-value services that help customers manage their businesses and their relationship with you in an efficient and easy-to-use manner (such as a client extranet) builds a loyalty that often lasts longer than similar analogue-based services.

The extent to which you require your global web presence to serve all stages of the customer lifecycle—from initial customer attraction through to retention—will determine the size and scope of your globalization effort, and indeed account for the resources it will take to establish such a total infrastructure and to roll out the functionality worldwide. To effectively manage scope, most companies start with information-based sites with basic information transactions before rolling out the more technologically robust platforms required for customer relationship management (CRM) and e-commerce. Keep in mind that big-bang total solutions take time, money, and massive commitment. Don't be afraid to start small, as long as your efforts are the first steps in carrying out a larger, longer-term service strategy.

Going global compounds the number and types of interactions the market has with your business and brand. The web experience is just one of many analog and digital interactions, and beyond experiencing an actual product or personal service, it can be one of the most accessible and defining experiences your customers have with you. As such, the site design and online experience should be built upon the solid foundation of the global business and brand strategy, and should reflect the values, attributes, and other aspects of the overall

brand personality. In addition, it requires a clear understanding of the customer, the markets in which they transact, the differences between markets, and the competitive landscape in each.

To demonstrate a brand's impact on globalization, consider two giants of American motoring: Harley-Davidson and Ford Motor Company. Whereas Ford produces different models for different markets, Harley-Davidson is an iconic American brand with a consistent look and feel throughout its global web presence. These two very different approaches require different forms of design, market research, and validation-and ultimately a different web architecture and experience. Companies like Harley-Davidson that reflect the uniform side of the globalization spectrum can take a broader approach to managing their global brand presence. Companies on the diversity side, like Ford Motor Company, must focus on the finer details and give greater consideration to the localization aspect of going global. This latter approach requires that greater care be given to selecting the resources that are applied and the outcomes that are desired. Despite this, each type of global company will have the same challenges when it comes to deciding what online services to provide-services that support the differences in their local markets. The selection and application of design research tools and methodologies employed to understand consumer needs, goals, habits, and motivations can greatly contribute to a positive end result, no matter what your ultimate goal may be.

Creating a global gateway

Global gateways are central to establishing a simple, easy-to-use global web architecture. A global gateway that effectively directs visitors to locally relevant content can have an immediate impact on a company's bottom line.

Gateways can take a variety of shapes and sizes. They reflect the scope of global operations and the extent to which a company has applied resources to its global business operations. They range from simple, single-page sites, where visitors select a language or a country before accessing content, to multi-layered sites with extensive content and functionality.

The best gateway is the gateway that works best with your visitors and your site. For example, the gateway you build will be different if you have thirty localized sites, as opposed to just two or three. Let's take a closer look at the different types of gateways. We'll use a hotel metaphor, where some sites can be regarded as lobbies, some as hotels, and others as hotel chains.

The entrance

The basic gateway rarely contains any content. It is simply a traffic direction that takes users to local websites where content is generally localized to target that market. A good example is Nike's site (www.nike.com). Before accessing any local content, visitors must first select a language and then a country. The goal of these sites is to drive traffic to a local solution as quickly as possible. Ikea's site (www.ikea.com) is similar to Nike's; however, the Ikea gateway allows visitors to explore content on the company's global brand proposition, a factor that brings it closer to our next type: the lobby.

Lobby sites tend to orient visitors to the type of content they can expect to find on the local site, but encourage them to visit the local site to get further information. Shell's global gateway (www.shell.com) is a good example. In addition to providing access to Shell's global web pages, the site hosts investor and corporate information, as well as basic information about Shell's products and services for its two principal customer groups, consumers and businesses. To access deeper and locally pertinent information, visitors must select their country of origin. Although the site provides some introduction to the business and brand, visitors must navigate locally for product details. From a service perspective, lobby gateways set an expectation with customers about the kind of service experience they can expect at their local sites.

The hotel

Hotel sites are essentially the master version of local content. Local sites are variations on the master. A good example of the hotel is Unilever's site (www.unilever.com), where the global gateway provides all possible information on the company, its values, and its brands. From this gateway, visitors can also access country sites where the content is a collection of master brand content localized for the market, as well as some local-specific content, such as news, events, and community involvement. In many regards, these sites follow the hotel chain model in that there is a global brand consistency to all the properties, yet each has a strong local focus. Though sites may follow a similar template from country to country and not appear to be distinctive, sites like Unilever's do a good job of servicing local and global information transaction needs.

Designing your global business

How a company is structured and managed also has a bearing on which of the above variations becomes the model for your web architecture's design. Whether you are embarking on your first major effort to create a global web presence or simply revisiting your current structures, a solid and logical organizational structure contributes greatly to the speed and effectiveness with which a global web presence can be rolled out. The considerations are different for a single-brand company operating in the United States and Europe, and a multi-brand, multi-product, multi-service, multi-national company operating in 60 countries throughout the world.

Regardless of the size of your globalization effort, a key principle for success is communication and inclusion. As you embark on your globalization efforts, it is important to build a global design and development team that is fully engaged in the process. At a minimum, begin to include regional stakeholders and develop an understanding of market variations. This knowledge and support will be critical to a successful launch and ongoing maintenance. You may also consider creating a central team to provide governance for the entire project and supply specialty knowledge and expertise to local teams to aid in design localization. A multi-functional steering committee consisting of senior managers from all divisions should drive the globalization strategy and provide review and approval input to the design and development teams for all major milestones. A central web team can also be responsible for day-to-day web operations, providing tactical support and implementing design and development decisions. Finally, a web globalization initiative is often an element of broader corporate strategic goals. The involvement of board-level management can be important to keeping a project on track.

Localizing your design

There are many ways to service customers and prospects online. There are limitless opportunities for businesses in just about any industry to build web applications that delight customers. How do you decide what to build... since what is likely not limitless are your resources? In a word, before you localize, internationalize. Craft a scaleable master design

that represents the major aspects of your business worldwide and anticipates the degree of localization that will be required in each market. The degree of localization can have a real impact on budgets and timelines.

Customer research is fundamental to all usercentered design, and therefore is a critical aspect of localization. When your design goal is a single website within a single market, the extent of your research is certainly manageable. Field studies, interviews, surveys, and other tools can be channeled into customer segments and a set of user/customer personas developed to drive design decisions. Because there are likely to be many service options at your disposal, knowing whether your largest segment is likely to adopt a new innovative tool is critical to managing your investments and achieving the return on your design investment.

However, when venturing into new markets, how do you manage user involvement for a site launch that covers upward of 40 countries? How do you incorporate the obvious differences reflected in each market? While you may be tempted to simply avoid attempts at extensive differentiation from market to market, there are options for including design best practices that won't break the bank. In many cases, it's a matter of tradeoffs. Creating an internationalized and template-based master design, which incorporates high-level input from regional business stakeholders and users, is a good starting point. This master design may be built upon considerations of a small number of markets that represent your largest markets, or those that are most profitable or fastest-growing-whatever is important to your business. As models for other countries, the exercise required to localize sites can be termed a design gap analysis, which identifies the key areas of difference from market to market and suggests how the design may be adjusted to reflect those differences. Again, the effort could be regarded as a matter of scale. After an initial assessment, which outlines the approaches that can be taken, the range of effort may look as follows:

- * Basic A basic approach might involve content gap analysis, resulting in localized information architecture documents and content catalogs, and basic translation.

- * Intermediate: An intermediate approach would include the basic activities described above, plus content customization and translation, image research and graphics localization, and simple layout changes to accommodate unique local features.

- * Advanced: A typical advanced approach involves revisiting the design process and may include research around culture, lifestyle, and aesthetic preferences. The outcome may be a revamp of the information architecture with new navigation models, new forms of interaction, and a creative brief for localizers (designers, writers, translators). It will also provide a technology roadmap upon which you can establish your future online service

strategy. Ideally, the master design is flexible enough to facilitate the required changes, and the local design maintains a design language that clearly establishes it as part of the global family of sites. Finally, local usability testing, particularly in strategic markets, will play an important role in validating your design decisions.

The current emerging global web architecture for Initial, a leading global service brand for Rentokil Initial, is a good example of how this model can successfully unfold (see illustrations above).

Domain and URL strategy

A company's domain and URL strategy is another critical consideration when launching a global web presence. For example, the .com domain has emerged as almost entirely US-centric. Companies relying on the .com domain as their leading centralized gateway to the world present a US-centric image that may or may not resonate with local markets. While this approach may be fine for brands that have "American" as part of their brand DNA, it may not work, for instance, for a service company that is staffed entirely by locals and where the local value proposition changes from market to market

A more global approach is to secure all national domains for your global company, brand, product, and service names. Local domains build positive perceptions about your commitment to the local market. In addition, local search engine spiders give points to local searches producing links to local URLs, which helps your positioning on that all-important first page of search results.

In many cases, you may not be able to acquire all the necessary local country domains. An early assignment should be to audit all currently owned domains for all the company's principal brand names (including obvious misspellings), followed by the development of a domain name acquisition strategy that ensures you have local URLs upon which to erect your new sites. This audit may in turn lead to a rationalization of sites that helps avoid the issue of sites competing for search results in local markets.

The relationship of your overall organizational structure to your customer-facing service and brand architecture affects how logical your domain names are, and in turn, your URL strategy. Simple matters such as how you name your businesses and services will affect the domains you establish. Without a sensible brand architecture, it is nearly impossible to build a logical and scaleable web architecture and URL strategy. And without a sensible URL strategy, potential customers will encounter usability issues, and internal marketing departments will find it difficult to take full advantage of all the benefits of optimized organic

search. Take, for example, Initial, part of Rentokil Initial and one of the UK's largest providers of property and facilities services. Initial has begun the process of aligning a diverse group of service brands under a consistent URL naming structure. Though the global gateway/lobby is hosted at initial.com, each local URL begins with the service brand delineator followed by the local domain. Examples are found at www.facilities.initial.co.uk and medical.initial.co.uk.

The importance of search engine optimization

A logical URL strategy has other important benefits for globalization beyond usability. It is also a major contributing factor to a successful search engine optimization (SEO) strategy, which in turn is of great importance to prospects seeking products and services. Search engine algorithms rely on URLs and information contained within them to determine what a web page is about. Furthermore, they rely heavily on the country-specific domain extension to help determine the relevance of content to a local searcher. Search marketing firm iProspect has this to say:

Our clients typically see an increase in visibility and resulting traffic when URLs and subdomains that include high-frequency, in-language keyword phrases are used. By using keyword phrase-dense URLs and implementing service-focused sub-domains, iProspect believes companies will see an increase in rankings and, consequently, an increase in traffic to their websites from the target market audiences.

The recipe for a successful SEO strategy is often complex, involving a finely tuned mix of URL, site structure, content with keywords, meta data, prioritization and indexing, page design, and development. However, a simple guideline is to select a domain structure that is as clean, concise, in-language, and keyword phrase-dense as possible. For example, a company operating in multiple markets with multiple sub-branded products and services might use the following structure, where "Acme" is the company name, "ServiceX" is the principal keyword associated with one of Acme's products, and the United Kingdom and Germany are target markets:

United Kingdom: <http://servicex.acme.co.uk>

Germany: <http://servicex.acme.de>

Managing content

The efficient and effective management of global and local content is critical to a successful web globalization strategy. One of the benefits of a content management system (CMS)-

based global site strategy is the ability to present the same consistent on-brand content in all markets. However, to enjoy the benefits of consistency, companies must first choose a content management system that is right for them. In order to properly select a CMS, supplier companies must have clear requirements and a plan for ensuring the successful deployment and acceptance of the CMS among geographically dispersed teams. The number of brands, channels, countries, content stakeholders, and degree of decentralization of marketing responsibilities are all factors that affect choices. Companies quickly realize that content management is not just about content, but also about people, organizational structure, process, and change.

One of the most important points is that the system should be easy to use for nontechnical people—in other words, the people who will be servicing your customers and prospects with fresh content on a regular basis. A browser-based interface is best for geographically dispersed teams, and should include a secure administration that can be managed globally to ensure that all who need access rights have them. From a translated content perspective, the more easily the CMS integrates with your translation vendors, the easier it will be for content managers. The efficiencies of time (and indeed budget) gained here can be critical when deployment dates are rapidly approaching and there are still pages of content to be translated and published.

Language and translation

A fundamental aspect of website and service localization is the translation of content. For many global companies, the master brand content is often first written in English and then translated for local markets. However, great care must be taken to ensure that translations are not just literal translations, as many English words and phrases simply do not translate. Companies should also be wary of automated translation programs. Though they may appear to have cost-saving benefits, the impact of a poorly expressed local value proposition can hurt the overall perception of the company. In fact, the problem can still exist even with human translation.

To address the challenge of generic translations, companies need to take steps to ensure translations make sense in local markets and that content has been translated with the correct tone of voice to truly reflect both the brand and its local proposition. Involve your translation partner early in the planning and budgeting process and provide guidance to translators on desired nuances. Techniques such as creating a language glossary of key terms and translating sample batches will help guide the translation company to the style of your desired result. Involving local business stakeholders in reviews is absolutely essential.

Translation can also be expensive and timeconsuming, so be sure to set a budget early in the globalization project and incorporate a realistic timeline into your project plans. Companies that take the time to incorporate an understanding of local factors into their brand-related communications have a better chance of succeeding in local markets. There are ways to reduce the cost and time of translation, including establishing a plan for a hierarchy of content and selecting a CMS that easily allows for translation to occur within the system. Translation memory software will also help to reduce the amount of content that needs to be translated and reviewed. In case you need to replace your translation vendor, make sure you own the memory so that future translators can take advantage of the invaluable knowledge you have established over years of translation.

Standards and guidelines; Policy or protocol

No matter what type of company you are, there are great benefits to forming a unified global design and branding protocol. Whether you plan to centralize your design and marketing efforts or devolve extensive freedom to local marketers and service providers, a policy or protocol that outlines the roles and responsibilities of all principal stakeholders is essential to speedy deployment and cohesive ongoing maintenance.

The degree to which control is passed on to local stakeholders will determine the balance between the application of strict must-adhereto standards and directional guidelines that provide a looser framework so that local businesses can adapt more quickly to local circumstances. A global web presence allows companies to take advantage of economies of scale that can positively affect the costs of global marketing communications. A content management system, customized for global and local administrative rights, is inevitably a key factor in the implementation of your standards and guidelines that allows you to take advantage of this economy of scale.

Conclusion

Digital channels to customers provide companies with opportunities for great innovation in how they provide services to their customers throughout the customer lifecycle. Whether directly through the web or through a range of information appliances, the ways in which companies in diverse industries can build useful service experiences that produce satisfied, loyal customers continues to expand.

Building a cohesive, consistent, integrated, and on-brand global web presence, critical to successfully realizing this opportunity, requires a steady global commitment over time. There is no one-size-fits-all solution-global web architectures must naturally adapt to the particular

circumstances of each company in terms of strategy, structure, and available resources. While the tools and technologies that support web globalization strategies have improved considerably, the challenge is pulling together the right suite of tools for your company's unique circumstances and having the human resources in place, globally and locally, to see it through. The fundamental question to answer then is, "How local do I want to be?"

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