Web Design: Going Native

Many in the industry have mystified
Web globalization. But the skillset required
isn't that far from traditional software localization.

by Bert Esselink

F our months ago, in September 2000, the second edition of
my book *A Practical Guide to Localization* was published. The
book provides information on all aspects of software product
and Web site localization, and is mainly targeted at technical trans-
lators, project managers, localization engineers, and design or
desktop publishing specialists. Although the book covers XML,
HTML, and Web site localization extensively, the main focus is still
on project-based localization, i.e. products that are being localized
as a whole, with a definite start date and end date.

Obviously, the Web has created a totally different localization
model, i.e., a program-based versus a project-based model. Web
sites are never a one-time project. Most professional Web sites con-
tain continuously updated and revised content, sometimes referred
to as streaming content. Most of today's professional Web sites are
updated frequently, are provided in multiple languages, and offer a
high degree of personalization. The main challenges in main-
taining multilingual (or global) Web sites is internationalizing the
site architecture, balancing global/translated versus local content,
automating translation workflows, and keeping multilingual con-
tent in sync with the source language.

Where product localization has been around for over 20 years,
professional Web site globalization is a relatively new phenom-
enon. According to a recent presentation by Roger Jeanty,
president of Lionbridge, we are now living in the "post-localiza-
tion era" where services have moved from language translation and
project management to an expanded value chain model encom-
passing translation management solutions and portals, multilingual
content management, and global e-testing.

Below I have tried to inventorize the structural changes in local-
ization approaches when dealing with software localization
projects versus dealing with Web site localization programs.

1. Update Frequency

The Web has provided publishers with a vehicle to frequently
update information and publish it immediately. New releases of
software products would typically be published once every year,
with—in most cases—intermediate patches or versions every three
to six months. On the Web, however, product information, product
support information, and even Web-based software applications

can be updated whenever necessary. Most of today's professional Web sites are updated at least once a day.

For multilingual Web sites this frequency of updates has raised the challenge of keeping all language versions of the Web site in sync. Updates in the source language, typically US English, should also be reflected in any other languages, preferably simultaneously. Obviously, this requires an extremely quick turnaround time for translations.

Where for static products, such as desktop software applications and support material, this process can be managed manually, for Web content some form of automation is required. Content management systems such as Vignette and Documentum provide all the means to have teams of contributors work jointly on constantly updated Web content, often automating the publishing workflow and providing each team member with individual rights to author, edit, approve, and publish information. Most of these systems, however, lack specific features to deal with translated content as of yet.

2. Translation Technology

The complexity of keeping content on a multilingual Web site in sync automatically brings us to the topic of translation technology. Various tools and Web content management systems have been developed to store and manage information in multiple languages on Web sites. Examples of such systems include Idiom's WorldServer and Lionbridge's Globalizaton Platform.

For general-purpose content management systems such as Interwoven and Broadvision, inclusion of multilingual capabilities in their core technology is only a matter of time, as more and more companies prefer to centrally manage their multilingual Web sites.

The main challenge here is the distributed nature of the people contributing to multilingual Web sites. Often the source language content is authored, edited, and published centrally. Translated or local-language versions of the content are provided by a combination of local offices, localization service providers, local distributors, and international marketing departments.

Setting up an organization and workflow that creates and manages content in multiple languages efficiently is a complicated task that is often underestimated. Even when the technology is in place to host and manage multilingual Web sites, many other issues need to be considered, such as provision of local (not localized) content, allocation of localization budgets, validation process for content translated by a third-party service provider, etc. Considering the fact that most corporate Web sites publish content from all departments in the company, i.e., sales and marketing, product management, product support, and corporate, a central body organizing and prioritizing the multilingual content may greatly reduce any conflicts.

3. Publisher/Localization Provider Relationship

Where traditional software localization projects enabled publishers to work with various localization providers for each individual project, Web localization programs automatically enforce a much tighter integration between the publishers' and vendors' technology, process and workflow, resources, and service model.

Publishers maintaining multilingual Web sites frequently opt for one of the following models: full outsourcing of all multilingual content publishing, or outsourcing of translation services only.

Some say we are now living in the "post-localization era"—where services have moved from language translation and project management to an expanded value chain model encompassing translation-management solutions and portals, multilingual content management, and global e-testing.

- *Full outsourcing model*—A full outsourcing model implies that the localization service provider integrates translation technology with the technology used by the publisher. An example would be an English Web site maintained by the publisher in the United States, and a separate server publishing all multilingual content—configured, installed, and often even maintained by the service provider. In this model, often also the design of the local(ized) content and the full translation workflow is managed by the service provider.

- *Translation services only model*—Many publishers prefer to centrally manage and maintain all content, regardless of language. In this model, only translatable content is sent to the vendor for translation, and returned to the publisher for inclusion on the multilingual Web site. This model really only works when a multilingual Web site architecture has been set up that totally separates translatable information from layout and functionality. In addition, the publisher needs to obtain all expertise and resources necessary to deal with multilingual translation and localization programs.

The multilingual Web industry is clearly in a process of moving a distributed model back to a more centralized model. Although multilingual and local language Web sites are considered a key asset to international businesses, a distributed model with a separate Web site for each target market could blur the global branding message. Moreover, the costs of managing and maintaining Web sites in various locations can be greatly reduced when implementing a centralized multilingual Web site model.

Another observation is that publishers are seeking to partner with localization service providers, as opposed to outsourcing one-time jobs to them. Globalization is a high priority for most global Web companies, and as a result many localization providers are offering new services, including consulting and testing, to their clients.

4. Translation Expertise

Regardless of technology used and outsourcing model adopted, language expertise in various vertical domains remains essential, probably even more so than in the "software localization era." Where software products often only require a certain level of domain expertise, for example in the area of enterprise resource planning or customer relationship management, Web localization

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not only requires this but also demands different translation approaches for various Web site components.

For example, if a corporate Web site contains both marketing and product information/support information, it is not likely that one translator or linguist can deal with both types of information in the same way. The marketing message may have to be adapted extensively to each target market, whereas most product information requires straightforward translation.

Most professional localization service providers will work with specialized marketing translation specialists who not only translate the information, but also change the message to reflect local habits and customs if necessary. With this type of marketing or sales content, often a word-based translation budgeting approach needs to be abandoned in favor of an hourly-based linguistic and international cultural marketing consulting approach.

5. So What Has *Not* Changed With the Web?

Obviously, the Web and the advent of multilingual Web sites have shaken up localization, but not all is lost. Virtually all of the core skills, processes, and methodologies developed in localization still apply to Web site localization projects. Creating a multilingual Web site which needs to go live in six languages within a two day timeframe does not mean standard process steps such as project preparation, language editing, proofreading, layout check, etc. can be skipped.

Web-based applications need to be localized exactly like the "traditional" desktop applications—the only difference being the delivery platform. Applications still have dialog boxes, menus, and messages that may need to be localized into other languages. The main differences are in the testing of the localized applications. Where desktop applications need to be tested on a range of different (language) versions of the operating system, Web applications need to be tested on a range of different browser and platform versions. In addition, Web-based applications very much

depend on the local bandwidth. An application that runs perfectly through the browser of a user in North America may be totally unusable for a user in Asia because of local bandwidth limitations.

In conclusion, for Web-based applications software localization does not change much. Although the internationalization features in "new" development platforms such as Java and XML have made localization much easier, the basic steps required to localize applications remain the same.

For Web sites publishing product or product support information in multiple languages, localization may be greatly simplified once the content management systems provide functionality to deal with multilingual content and localization process workflows. Once the technology and localization model is in place, both publishers and translators should be able to focus on their core activities without having to deal with various file formats, layout complexities, communication issues, etc. Today, the only way to achieve this is a tight cooperation between and integration of publishers and localization service providers.

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