

Superfast Business Wales



# Business Guide

## Optimising Your Website for International Trade

Managing the design of just one website for the UK market can be hard work. When you need five, or even 20, different sites for potential customers around the world, the prospect can seem daunting.

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## Optimising Your Website for International Trade

### Introduction

Managing the design of just one website for the UK market can be hard work. When you need five, or even 20, different sites for potential customers around the world, the prospect can seem daunting.

But following some basic principles can help you produce websites that work for international customers. So this guide will give you some practical pointers if you're doing it yourself, and help you understand the major issues involved if you're hiring in specialist support.

Generally speaking, most tools for designing, creating, integrating, updating, maintaining and analysing your web presence are themselves web-enabled. It goes without saying, therefore, that having a Superfast Broadband connection can make these processes far easier to manage.

As we are dealing with trade, a lot of our advice specifically concerns ecommerce – conducting online transactions with international customers. But even if you are only using the web as a shop window, and plan to complete actual sales in a more old-fashioned way (for example by email or phone), most of the same guidelines apply.

We're also primarily looking at the conventional web as accessed through PCs, though again, many of the points also apply to mobile.

Underpinning all of the advice contained in this guide is the availability of a fast broadband connection which will be essential in enabling you to efficiently manage large amounts of multimedia content, test numerous versions of your website, upload content to remote servers, and so on.

**95%** of people in the world don't speak English as their native language – and five billion don't even use the Roman alphabet. (Sources: Nationalencyklopedin; David Sacks, The Alphabet.)



## Understand

### Design for the World – Opportunities and Challenges

The design goals of an effective international website are just the same as for any online presence. The site needs to be usable for customers – enabling them to find what they need, and complete a purchase. But it also needs to be usable for you: allowing you to show off your products or services in a way that helps your marketing goals, manage transactions and customer relationships, and comply with rules and regulations.

The difference between international design and design targeted at your home country is that when you're dealing with foreign markets, it's not only necessary to make the site attractive and easy to use – it's all too easy to inadvertently create real problems that will deter customers, raise practical difficulties in fulfilling orders, or put you on the wrong side of the law.

And one of the most common ways to create these problems is to assume that what works in the UK will apply everywhere.

There's not just one 'world' to consider, of course. If you're designing primarily for the European and North American markets, for example, some of the issues relating to developing countries can be safely ignored. And even within individual countries, there are numerous different kinds of consumers; you can never be everything to everyone. But the advice in this guide will help you create an online presence that is meaningful and useful to at least some of them.

In the next section, we'll consider some technical issues. After that, we'll look at some of the major challenges related to the cultural aspects of design.

## Adopt

### Getting Started

- Define the goals of the website, as you would for any project
- Establish the simplest way of achieving these in design and technology terms, aiming for a smooth, fast user experience on as many platforms as possible
- Look at the local market leaders for practical design tips
- Learn about the local culture in terms of do's and don'ts.



## Exploit

### Optimising the Experience for International Customers

- **Loading speeds** are still an issue in some countries – not everywhere has broadband. So particularly if you're expecting customers from the developing world, go easy on the bandwidth-hungry video, and run some of the many online loading-speed tests that are available.
- **The desktop/tablet/phone split** is far from the same in every country, and the same goes for browsers. In some parts of the world consumers are still using desktops or laptops to access the web. In others mobiles are becoming much more common. And they may not always be the countries you expect, either.
- Similarly, **different browsers** are popular in different areas. So to maximise your website's usefulness, make it usable on as many platforms and browsers as possible – which means keeping it simple. This is particularly the case if you're not producing country-specific versions but relying on one site, or just a few, to serve the world.
- **Keeping it simple** also means using common fonts such as those routinely supplied with Windows, OS X and other major operating systems.
- Remember **automatic translation**, which your visitors might apply to your pages if they're not in a local language. One obvious implication is to present your content as text wherever possible, rather than in images – it may not look quite so elegant, but the images are completely inaccessible to translation software (and don't help much with SEO).
- Also bear in mind that your **layout** needs to survive translation: once the text has gone into the foreign language it's likely to be a different length, and may even read from right to left.
- Employing a **Unicode font** that incorporates many different alphabets will ensure that the visual flavour of your pages is preserved even if they are automatically translated by a visitor into, say, Arabic or Russian. However, there are not many such fonts available (by no means all Unicode-compliant fonts actually support every major script) and the limited choice might outweigh the benefits, unless you expect large numbers of customers from parts of the world that don't use the Roman alphabet.
- **Shopping cart software** will probably need adjustment to accommodate international customers. Not only are currencies different but there are also formatting variations in postal codes and phone numbers, for example. Using an ecommerce platform that supports multilingual content and multi-currency payments, rather than building it all from scratch, can avoid many headaches here.
- Basic principles of **search engine optimisation** (SEO) apply around the world but the details of best practice can vary widely, thanks to language differences and because markets favour different search engines. Perhaps the most famous example is Baidu, dominant in China – where Google is barely used at all. If you're serious about a specific country you may well need local help with SEO.



## Cultural and Language Issues

- There are strong colour associations, both positive and negative, in different cultures. Red is exciting and stimulating in most western and Asian cultures, but associated with danger in the Middle East. Yellow in Latin America can mean death, not a sunny day; but pink does not have particularly feminine associations there. Black is strong and masculine in China, evil in nearby Thailand. None of this means you should avoid these colours entirely, but you should at least be aware of unintended meanings. A relatively drab light background and dark text are always a safe bet.
- It's well-known, but bears repeating, that edgy content goes beyond the pale in some countries. So avoid things like semi-nudity (in fact, using pictures of people in general can be fraught with potential to give offence), as well as references to political issues or terrorism. The old editor's rule applies: if in doubt, leave it out.
- Don't forget that national tastes in music differ even more than in colours. Even if you don't offend anyone, you may well baffle them – vintage British hits probably won't have instant recognition in Turkey for example. Some would say music is best avoided on websites anyway, and this may be doubly true when you're designing for an international audience.
- The same goes for humour. National senses of what's funny and isn't are famously varied. Sophisticated witticisms may fall flat and cruder ones may offend, though that doesn't mean your site has to be deadly serious either.
- Obviously, however, balance is important. It is pointless making your ecommerce presence dull and unappealing to a thousand British customers for the sake of gaining one from Fiji.
- Enabling international transactions is not just about solving problems. You can actually increase sales by localising things like pricing and the shopping cart. For example: making prices visible in local currencies, and rounding them so the conversion doesn't result in a complicated-looking figure, can help.
- Sales taxes should also be shown in the style familiar to visitors (and of course local laws may require a specific way of presenting them). For instance, U.S. consumers expect sales tax to be added to the displayed price, whereas Europeans presume that VAT is already included.
- Even if you've decided against running specific international websites and are instead expecting international customers come to your UK site, you can still make life easier for them, perhaps by providing a currency-conversion tool; and by writing in simple language, or even using the version of English called Simplified English which has been designed for easy comprehensibility. It also makes automated translation easier.
- Not only your main website, but also your mobile messaging, social media presence, and user-generated content will need to be designed for different markets' norms. We have produced a separate guide on 'Social Media for International Business'.



## Top Tips

- In design, simplicity rules. A straightforward, easy-to-use site is much more effective – and more easily reusable for further countries – than a half-understood attempt at full-blown local style.
- Simplicity rules in technology terms, too. Make as few assumptions as possible about your users' browsers, plug-ins, applications and so on (unless your market is especially sophisticated). No-frills HTML will survive in the widest range of situations.
- Project management software can help you keep track of how all the numerous elements making up a website are progressing. There are cheap or free cloud-based packages available.
- Look at the local competition to understand how to handle SEO for unfamiliar search engines, or in a foreign language.
- Pictures can speak louder than words, and certainly more clearly than a language unfamiliar to your customers, for example when illustrating a product feature or giving instructions on use. But remember they're not as easily searchable as text, so they are much less useful for SEO.
- Shopping carts and other transactional systems may have specific legal requirements in different countries that affect design.
- Test your site with local users, if possible. A web design firm in the target country may be able to help.



## NEXT STEPS

1. Register to attend a fully-funded Business Development Workshop.  
[www.business.wales.gov.uk/superfastbusinesswales/events](http://www.business.wales.gov.uk/superfastbusinesswales/events)
2. Make an appointment to see a Business Advisor who will help you create a personal action plan to grow your business.  
[www.business.wales.gov.uk/contact-us](http://www.business.wales.gov.uk/contact-us)

For further information on International Trade take a look at:

See how other businesses in Wales have exploited Superfast Broadband  
[www.business.wales.gov.uk/superfastbusinesswales/superfast-success-stories](http://www.business.wales.gov.uk/superfastbusinesswales/superfast-success-stories)

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