

# **Guidelines for Globalizing American Websites**

By Debra A. Brown, APR  
27 March 2005

George F. Hayhoe, Ph.D., Director

For years, the United States dominated the Web. In its infancy, public Websites were primarily written by Americans, for Americans. Few countries could match the speed at which American businesses, schools, and homes were connecting to the World Wide Web. The foundation of a strong and stable telephone service helped millions connect on a daily basis. The emergence of high-speed access via cable modems and T1 lines sped up the process of retrieving information, ensuring its adaptation into the daily lives of Americans everywhere. In fact, the Internet Usage and Population Statistics published on 3 February 2005 by InternetWorldStats.com, found that 68.8% of the US population currently uses the Internet, the highest per-capita usage rate in the world.

In terms of raw usage, however, the U.S. is no longer dominating the Internet. In the same study, InternetWorldStats.com found that 201.6 million of the 817.4 million current Internet users reside in the U.S. Regionally, the top three Internet users are:

1. Asia, 266.7 million, 32.6% of the total number of Internet users
2. Europe, 230.9 million, 28.3% of the total number of Internet users
3. North America, 218.4 million, 26.7% of the total number of Internet users

These numbers clearly show the true globalization of the Internet. This globalization has brought information and opportunity on an unprecedented scale. International business transactions that were once reserved only for large corporations with extensive travel budgets are now available to all. The Internet has enabled businesses of all sizes to work together in a new, increasingly level playing field.

## Identifying Your Audience

In order for businesses in the United States to take advantage of the opportunities the Web provides, they must help their Website evolve from primarily a U.S. focused communication vehicle, to a truly global communication vehicle. This change of focus will affect every aspect of the Website, including design, content, and navigation. The first step is to determine your audience.

To determine your target audience, conduct an audience analysis. There are six general dimensions for characterizing audience (Turns and Wagner 69). These items represent historical as well as current trends on issues that are important to understand about an audience in order to successfully design for that audience.

1. **Role.** Your audience is likely to be comprised of several role categories (company decision-maker, research student, etc.). These relevant roles can be used to aggregate findings and make inferences about the audience.
2. **Goals.** Everyone who visits your Website has a goal--a reason or purpose for being at the site. Information about user goals can guide decisions about the scope, character, and organization of the site's content.
3. **Knowledge.** Information about users' knowledge can influence a variety of system design issues, such as the vocabulary used in the text, the range of topics covered, the information provided about a topic, and technical capabilities available in the system.

4. **Human factors.** Relevant abilities and skills include perceptual abilities (such as vision, color blindness, etc.) as well as physical abilities and disabilities that may require accessibility considerations.
5. **Circumstances of use.** Circumstances include the environment in which the use occurs, other available resources (both technological and human), the emotional state of the user at the time of use, the process by which users arrives at the tool, timing constraints on the activity, and the type of equipment being used.
6. **Culture.** Culture refers to shared beliefs, language, practices, traditions, and values of a group of people. There are many instances where cultural ignorance has been displayed through poor design of information that is then translated. This can be a problem even within English speaking countries. For example, take the simple phrase “to have tea”; for someone from the United States it refers to a warm drink; to an English person it is afternoon tea served with light food; to Australians it frequently means the evening meal (Fisher and Chong 122).

Understanding your audience is the first step in developing a global Website. You don't need to become an expert in each target country, but an understanding of the uniqueness of the culture will help you avoid potential problems that could arise later in the globalization process. Some Web developers will even cut out representations of each type of audience member from magazines to post in their workspace. They'll post images of an Asian businessperson, Italian baker, or Brazilian student to help them concentrate on who their audience is and their individual needs.

## **Designing a Global Website**

The Web is a global medium. Whether a business intends for a site to be used by an international audience or not, it is--readers from around the world can and may access it at any time. Globalizing a Website involves creating a single site designed to work for readers from all cultures (Spyridakis 374).

Design, in its simplest sense, is an attempt to convey visually the logical, functional, or natural relationships that exist among the elements in an information display (Williams 384-385). For global Websites, design is best when it's simple. Users expect to find fast, easy, and accurate access to the information they seek. A clean, simple design can enable users to accomplish their goals, the reason(s) they are visiting your site.

To keep graphic design elements recognizable and relevant to a global audience, follow these five guidelines:

1. Avoid pictures that serve no purpose except for filler or artistic reasons.
2. Supplement visuals with explanatory text or text labels as pictures can express something other than what they literally depict. (Williams 391).
3. Do not use any body parts or animals in icons or graphics. If you need to show a human element, use a simple, abstract depiction, free from any indication of race or gender (Arnold 203). See figure 1.

4. Avoid hand gestures completely. There aren't any hand gestures that universally mean the same thing. What may be considered "normal" in one culture, could be considered rude or vulgar in another.
5. Avoid humor. Humor is cultural and doesn't cross over to other cultures well.



**Figure 1**

An appropriate, simple abstract showing the human element that would be appropriate for a globalized website.

The choice of symbols, icons, and graphical representations of information must be made in a cultural context if it is to be understood. Even the choice of color has implications. For example, in the U.S., black represents death and white is purity. In the Chinese culture, red is used for good fortune and happiness, and is the predominant color in traditional rituals such as weddings. White, however, is for funerals. Red is not understood to be a warning or to mean "stop" to Chinese users; in fact, it could invoke the opposite response. If a Chinese user sees a red signal intended to alert them to an action that should not be performed, that user may in fact continue, believing the action is correct (Fisher and Chong 122-123). However, this is starting to change due to Western influences. Keeping your Website simple and understanding your audience will help you avoid making fundamental mistakes that will confuse, insult, or in anyway distract your user from the message you are trying to communicate.

To maintain simplicity in a Website, focus on unity, keeping the elements unified. Unity refers to the degree to which elements on the page address a single purpose and avoid things irrelevant to that purpose (Williams 388). The more unified the page, the easier it will be for the user to correctly comprehend and navigate the Website.

To increase unity, follow these four guidelines:

1. Provide clear, brief, and highly conspicuous orientation information on the home page. Although links are designed to indicate their destinations, Web users often wish to confirm that they have indeed followed a relevant link and landed where they expected (Farkas and Farkas 350).
2. Include the site name/logo on secondary pages to maintain site identity and reinforce the brand.
3. Provide a link to the home page on every page throughout the site. Currently, many Websites are linking the corporate logo to the home page once again reinforcing the brand while freeing up valuable real estate.
4. Put an informative title at the top of each page and include an introduction or introductory sentence that announces the topic.

As we put all these elements into practice for a globalized Website, it's important to take into account the accessibility and reliability of technology around the world. Specific technical capabilities to be mindful of include connection speed and quality, computer capabilities,

outages of electricity and phone service, costs of Internet access, and computer reliability and support (Horton 17).

While technology may be the great equalizer, all technology is not created equal. When designing Websites we must pay attention to potentially high access costs and slow and/or unreliable connections. Perhaps it is for some of these reasons that a Japanese survey reveals that the number one requirement for a compelling Website is fast-loading pages, and the number one turn off is slow-loading pages (Arnold 204).

### **Globalizing Website Content**

While the process of sensation and perception, learning, memory, problem solving, and acting are universal, the concepts, schemata, references, graphics, subtext, and eye movement across a page or screen are not. When writing for other cultures, you must write in a way that ensures your target cultures can access your information (Coe 291). One of the biggest challenges when developing a globalized Website is communicating without the benefit of a common language.

To encourage clear and accurate communication, write content that is culturally generic and easily translatable. Avoid common problem areas, including:

- **Measurement terminology.** Use measurement terminology in either international units (for example, the metric system, 24-hour military-time clock, etc.), or units specific to different cultures (Spyridakis 375). You can also provide a conversion

tool, or link to one, to enable users to convert a unit into whatever measurement is most meaningful to them.

- **Possessives.** Many non-English-speaking cultures do not indicate possession with “’s.” Instead of saying “the book’s index,” they say “the index of the book.” (Coe 294)
- **Contractions.** Many non-English-speaking cultures do not use contractions. Instead of saying “isn’t,” “can’t” or “won’t,” use “is not,” “can not,” or “will not.” (294)
- **Culture-specific words** and phrases including slang, jargon, buzzwords, abbreviations, euphemisms, acronyms, clichés, similes, metaphors, and military and sports terminology (Spyridakis 375).
- **“Cute” wording** of titles and phrases (375).
- **Imperatives.** Some non-U.S. cultures take offense at the imperative (command) form of verbs. You can use a “softer” form of the imperative to convey the same information. For example, instead of saying, “insert the disk into drive A,” you can say, “make sure the disk is in drive A.” Both are imperatives, but the second appears less abrasive (Coe 295).
- **And/or constructions.** Non-English languages do not use the “and/or” construction, so spell it out in your source. Say, “use commands and macros” instead of, “use commands and/or macros.” (297)
- **Date format.** In the U.S., 5/9/95 means May 9, 1995, but in other cultures it means September 5, 1995. When writing for translation, always spell out the date to avoid confusion (297).

Of course, culturally generic style isn't enough; the content itself must be readable. It's commonly argued that Website users don't read content; they skim it. To make it easy for users to quickly read or scan a Website until they find the information for which they seek, follow these nine guidelines:

1. Use sans serif typefaces (they display better on a monitor).
2. Use 12-14 point type for continuous text.
3. Avoid the overuse of bold and italics.
4. Avoid setting type in all caps for continuous text.
5. Arrange type intended for extended reading flush left/ragged right.
6. Except, perhaps, for headings, avoid lines of type shorter than 40 characters and longer than 60 characters.
7. Provide extra space (leading) between lines of type.
8. Mark the boundaries between paragraphs with blank lines rather than indentation.
9. Use headings and subheadings to help visually reveal the relationships among the text elements they label (Williams 389-390).

### **Globalizing Website Navigation**

Even with the best design and globalized content, if the user can't find the information for which they're seeking, all the work is in vain. When designing navigation for an international audience, the best choice appears to be a combination of text and visual components that together indicate the language the Web user can expect when following a link (Arnold 201).

Users navigate from one page to another via links. It's imperative that links in globalized Websites are obvious and engaging to the user.

1. Be sure all links indicate they are links. Well-established cues such as underlining and the raised "button" should be used to indicate links. Don't use them for other purposes.
2. Avoid cluttered page designs that make links hard to identify.
3. Make sure the most important links appear high enough on the page to be visible without scrolling.
4. Be sure all links clearly indicate their destinations – then let users know they've arrived at their destination. Use layering techniques, such as a rollover that describes that section in greater detail.
5. Within limits, it's better to favor breadth over depth in Website hierarchies. People are more likely to utilize navigational links displayed horizontally across the page than displayed vertically. To keep hierarchies from getting too deep, you must make them wider. To avoid too much breadth, you must make them deeper. The burden of having to scan more levels of depth is worse than scanning a longer list of links. (Farkas and Farkas 342-345)

Creating logical and ordered navigation is key to having a globalized Website. Few Websites will succeed unless users can efficiently find the content in which they are interested.

## **Conclusion**

All Websites are international in that they reach an international audience. Relatively few, however, are global in the sense that they effectively break through the multiple communication barriers that exist in international communication.

Study the culture of your intended audience. If possible, physically go the country in which your audience resides and experience the country, its culture, and its language first-hand. Read the history of the country, some of its literature, and become familiar with their art. Besides aiding you in creating a truly global Website that provides value to your target audience, it will also make you a more well rounded professional.

As you create a Website to take advantage of the Web's global marketplace, pay extra attention to the terminology you use and the graphics you choose to display on your site. Be sensitive to the implications that these choices will bring. Keep the site clean and clear with simple navigation. Make it easy for users to find and understand the information for which they seek.

By moving the focus of the site from a U.S.-centric model to a truly global model, we will be able to take advantage of all the benefits this international medium has to offer.

## Works Cited

- Arnold, Mitchell D. "Building a Truly World Wide Web: A Review of the Essential for International Communication." *Technical Communication* 45.2 (1998) 197-206.
- Coe, Marlana. *Human Factors for Technical Communicators*. New York: Wiley, 1996.
- Farkas, David K. and Jean B. "Guidelines for Designing Web Navigation." *Technical Communication* 47.3 (2000) 341-358.
- Fisher, Julie and Janice Chong. "Improving the Usability of Online Information When Translated from English to Chinese." *IEEE Transaction on Professional Communication* 39.3 (1996) 122-128.
- Internet Usage Statistics. 3 February 2005. <http://www.internetworldstate.com>
- Horton, William. *Multicultural Multimedia*. <http://www.horton.com>.
- Spyridakis, Jan H. "Guidelines for Authoring Comprehensible Web Pages and Evaluating Their Success." *Technical Communication* 47.3 (2000) 359-382.
- Turns, Jennifer and Tracey S. Wagner. "Characterizing Audience for Informational Website Design." *Technical Communication* 51.1 (2004) 68-85.
- Williams, Thomas R. "Guidelines for Designing and Evaluating the Display of Information on the Web." *Technical Communication* 47.3 (2000) 383-396.