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Plan for the globalization of the Internet
By: Alan K'necht (12 Mar 1999)

It's hard to believe that it's been almost two years since I started standing on my soapbox and warning the world about the issues of globalization and the Internet. At the time, it was hard to find anyone in North America who was willing to listen.

Too many times I heard, "Why worry, everyone needs to know English to use the Internet," or "They just have learn to do business the American way!" Well, two years have passed and I'm happy to report that some progress has been made.

Since my early forays into this uncharted arena, I managed to hit a few milestones. First was a gathering of 20 or so people to an off-shoot discussion at a Web development conference. Then a few months later it was a standing-room-only presentation to almost 200 people at the prestigious CNET Builder Live conference. When Computer World Canada published my first column on this subject in January 1999, it was one of the first publications in the world to put more then a few sentences in print on the subject.

I'm happy to report that as we enter the year 2000, many people are starting to get it. Perhaps it's the expansion of the Internet outside of North America. Perhaps it's simply that U.S.-based businesses are waking up to the fact that more then half (and growing) of the Internet market lies beyond the US border.

What I'm not happy to report is that Canadian businesses still lag well behind their American counterparts in realizing that when you're on-line, your market doesn't stop at the city limits or even at the border. Your potential market is everyone with an Internet connection. Given the low value of the Canadian dollar and a lower cost of labour in Canada vs. the U.S., many Canadian companies are letting the Internet commerce ship sail without them.

And the numbers exist to back-up that concern. Europe is expected to have 121 million Internet users by 2004 (Nua Internet Surveys), Asia-Pacific will have 374 million users by 2005 (The Yankee Group), and 11.2 million people will use the Internet in Germany (ARD/ZDF-Online-Study 1999). And also telling, 42.3 per cent of Internet users don't use English, 332 million speak Spanish and 72 million use French (all according to euromktg.com).

So if these numbers have you convinced that it's time to start addressing the issues of globalization and Internet commerce initiatives or to simply make your Web site more Internationally friendly, I suggest you dig up last year's column (http://www.lti.on.ca/cw/archive/CW15-01/cw_wtemplate.cfm?filename=c1501i3.htm).

To help you along the way, here are some tips I recently gave out at a marketing conference on this issue.

Address Validation: One of the biggest Web mistakes that companies make is to validate address entries. It's a great idea to conduct form validation to ensure that critical information is entered into on-line forms, but stop there. Many companies go on to validate the telephone number (ensure 10 digits) or validate postal codes/Zip codes (U.S. and Canadian formats). Guess what, the whole world doesn't follow this standards. So if you have an on-line store and you require the person's postal code, make sure the form will accept postal codes from France, Australia, Germany, U.K., etc. When it comes to phone numbers, many countries don't use seven digit telephone numbers and many simply have a one or two digit area code.

State what country you're in: I can't tell you how many Web sites I've visited and found an interesting product or service, but couldn't find where the offering company was located. This effects your business two ways. First, people just want to know, and secondly if your service is something that is not offered internationally (a spa, for example) people may be reluctant to contact you if they don't know where you are.

On-Line Contests: Too many times you only find out that you're not qualified to enter at the registration page or even after you've registered. This is a sure way to tick-off potential customers and perhaps to lose them forever.

Currency: Declare the currency your prices are in. Simply putting a "$" doesn't mean anything. Promote the fact that your prices are in Canadian dollars vs. American dollars.

Date Formats: This is another big offender. With the Y2K scare, we all learned to express years as four digits, yet most people don't know if it's month\day\year or day\month\year. I always recommend using the ISO standard of year\month\day. From some informal surveys that I've conducted it actually turns out that users prefer seeing dates written in full (January 11, 2000). So take your pick.

Just by following these five little tips, you're well on your way to making your Internet projects more successful on a global basis. It's easy for IT professionals to get caught up in validation coding or simply displaying things the way the client wants, but if we're professionals then it's also our job to make sure what we do is done right, and that means it works everywhere in the world.

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