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## **Build international Web sites -- but be cautious**

By: Alan K'necht (15 Jan 1999)

Web developers face overwhelming frustration when creating Web sites targeted at international audiences.

This was brought home to me during CNET's Fall '98 Builder Live conference. I had the opportunity to host a panel discussion on the issues around international markets, and while the panel did not deliver a single solution, the fact that the session drew a standing-room-only crowd demonstrates that this issue is top-of-mind for many developers.

What the panel did deliver was a list of some Dos and Don'ts and a few watch-out-fors.

The first and most obvious Do was to start offering Web sites in languages other than English. With approximately 42 per cent of Internet users employing a native language other than English (according to [www.euromktg.com/globstats/index.html](http://www.euromktg.com/globstats/index.html)), it's time corporations and Web developers started paying attention to the issue of language.

Once an organization makes the decision to offer its Web site in a variety of languages, there are several don'ts to watch out for that can help make your on-line offering a better international hit.

The don'ts when it came to offering alternative languages were: 1) not to use any of the currently available translation software as your only source for translation; and 2) don't assume, just because someone knows a language, that the person is an effective translator.

The panellists were quick to point out regional issues in language, which included phraseology, spelling and grammar variations. What might read well in Spain will fail in Chile, for example. Katrina Teague from the U.S. suggested using translators who live in your target area, and panellist Philipp Gysling from Switzerland added, "Do a reverse translation to verify that content translates back properly."

Fortunately, the Internet makes it easy to get translations done from anywhere in the world.

When it comes to linguistic differences between distinct regions and countries, it was suggested to use flags as the language indicator instead of a language option (i.e. Spain's flag vs. Chile's flag to indicate which version of Spanish is being used, instead of offering "Español").

Varying technology use between countries was also addressed. As panellists Michel Heuvelmans from Belgium pointed out, "In France over 60 per cent of people accessing the Internet are using AOL, while in Germany the use of Netscape still outpaces IE."

Heuvelmans also pointed out that Europeans are less likely to download browser upgrades, even when they are free. Hence the distribution of 4.x browsers in Europe is far behind the pace set in North America. In the words of Gysling, "When you're paying for your call by the minute and you have a 14MB file to download over a 28.8 modem, it's anything but free." So don't assume that your Web visitor will download the latest browser or browser plug-in just so he or she can see the latest tricks on your Web site.

Also, don't assume graphics that work great in one country will work in others. Icons which have a regional flare just don't crossover. Certain images or colour combinations, which make sense in North America, may offend people elsewhere in the world.

Ultimately, it comes down to this: if you are building a Web site and need it to work in a variety of countries, be sure to have someone from those countries review not only the content, but the look and feel as well.

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