



Never underestimate the importance of local culture

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Abstract

The world is rich in cultural differences, so that localizing a web site involves more than just changing the language. In this article, Graham Rhind looks at the global advertising of one bank and checks to see whether its claims have been put into practice as regards to its web data collection forms.

Database marketers are notorious, at least to me, for giving a low priority to the importance of language in their work. They remove diacritical marks with abandon, abbreviate and manipulate data to the point of destruction, and usually have to be persuaded hard to produce marketing material in any language other than their own. Localization workers go to other extremes. Though a good deal more is involved in localizing, for example, a website, than just changing its language, localizers often give those topics short shrift ♦ literally. In a very recent book about localization, of its 330 pages, only one page was given over to the need to localize address and telephone number data. This is certainly no exception.

A synergy is required between these two approaches to meet the real needs of users.

You may have noticed an advertising campaign currently being run by a large multinational bank. Each advertisement contains a series of pictures indicating how something with a meaning to one culture can have a very different meaning in another. For example, an illustration of three different balls shows how the word ♦football♦ indicates something very different to Americans, the British and Australians. ♦Never underestimate the importance of local knowledge♦ is the slogan. It♦s a message I♦ve been trying to get over for years, the slogan encompasses many of the issues perfectly. These advertisements illustrate perfectly the canyon which exists between the knowledge that people need to market on a global scale, and the amount of knowledge that they have.

Or, at least, the amount that they utilize.

Because though recognizing that we live in a diverse world is a great first step, and not underestimating that knowledge is a great following step, the third step, applying that knowledge ♦ and applying it

effectively is rarely achieved.

The bank in question is a good example. After seeing, and admiring, their advertising I scurried off to their website to see how they have chosen to apply their local knowledge. After all, they wouldn't boast about their local knowledge so loudly without having put it to effective use, would they? Would they?

I dug into their website until I found a web-form to request information.

A web form. Just the one.

Despite there being about 120 different address formats in our world, and around 36 different personal name formats, and despite the fact that a web page provides a mass of opportunities for interactivity with the user, the bank with the local knowledge chose to use a single form for every enquirer, regardless of where they were on the globe, what their cultural background was, and how their personalized information might need localized treatment.

Inevitably, this brings problems. The field labels in the form may have been understood in one culture, but would not have meant the same thing in another (I mused, briefly, over suggesting to the bank that they use that as an example in their next campaign). They use, for example the field labels Title, First name and Last name. Even for an Anglo-Saxon speaker of English, like myself, the requirement for the field title is not clear. Are they looking for my form of address (Mr)? Do they want my job title? Clearly they will collect different information from each person, depending on their interpretation of the field title. Ask a German for his or her title, and they are as likely to provide their academic title as anything else. Each culture differs in this respect. I have often had to clean up databases with data collected from a form with this same, unclear, label.

First name, Last name? It appears that the user is being asked to write their name in two boxes on the basis of the order in which it is written. Leaving aside, for a moment, the fact that a majority of people on our planet do not have names which follow the given name/family name pattern of us Anglo-Saxons, there are also a great deal of people who, if they do have a given name and a family name, write it in a different order. So, ask me for my first name and I shall say Graham. Ask my Hungarian friend for his first name, i.e. the name he writes first, and he will say Matura which is his family name. Have you ever collected global personal name data incorrectly in this way and have later needed to correct it? You wouldn't be alone, and any attempt at correction of this, or similar problems, will not result in accurate data because of the complexity and extraordinary inventiveness in naming that can only be achieved by collecting data correctly in the first place.

If the Last name field is a required field, as it usually is, a new problem arises for those large number of people from cultures which do not have family names many muslims, for example, Indonesians and so on.

The bank's web-form goes on to ask for an address, with four general address lines, followed by a field requesting Post/Zip code and then one requesting Country/Territory.

I wouldn't like to have to clean data which has been entered into general address fields in this way, but that discussion rather depends on how the bank stores its address data and belongs in a different article. More of concern is the assumption that the user will write his or her address normally with a postal code at the bottom. This is certainly not the case in some countries it is written at the top of an address block. Giving a user a form with the fields in the correct order according to the country in which they live is a very simple and cost effective way of making data entry for the user easier and increasing data and database quality for the company concerned.

Worse is the field asking for Country / Territory. It contains no dropdown list of possibilities, so you can expect a huge number of variations on a theme to be entered. As a country name list can be created which is exhaustive and standardized (though, ideally, companies should be more pragmatic in the items they add to a country list than standards authorities currently are), there is no reason not to do this.

There follows a field Nationality. Well, that would be fair enough, except that the drop down next to this field label does not contain a list of nationalities, such as Dutch, English, French, German, but a list of country names The Netherlands, United Kingdom, France, Germany. Nobody should need to be told that a country name and a nationality are not the same thing I'm British but live in The

Netherlands, for example ♦ but it is very worrying how many companies make such simple and easily avoidable errors on their web sites.

Let me be clear ♦ the bank I ♦m speaking about is not alone. 99.9% of companies with a web presence do not take any account of local differences when collecting data through their websites. Lack of knowledge of local requirements is not a problem that I foresee as being resolved in the short term. When a company has the knowledge, far too often they do not act on that information to improve their data quality. Most companies do not have the knowledge and make no effort to attain it, or rely on suppliers who are often not able to apply the knowledge well. I ♦m hoping that at least more companies will open their eyes and recognize that the diversity of cultures on our planet requires a different approach to global marketing and data management.