



ALPHA



White Paper

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# The 10 essential steps to localizing your eCommerce business

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For businesses looking to take their eCommerce platforms into new markets, what are the key steps to take? Here we identify a 10-point plan that helps outline the key stages in any cross-border eCommerce strategy when expanding into different regions.

This white paper explores how effective localization based on in-country market research, cultural adaptation and technical insight offers a highly focused, results-driven approach.

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## Setting the e-scene

But before we launch into step one, let's set the e-scene. The retail environment in 2020 is a very different place to what it was just five years ago. In the last four months, the rapid pace of the eCommerce transformation has turned into an all-out sprint.

Your high street is now digital. Your shopping basket is virtual. You check-out with a click. Perhaps faster than we had ever imagined, in the 2020s eCommerce is the new normal.

Physical stores, already under threat from online sales, are clearly in a precarious position as lockdown measures slowly ease across the world. As yet, it is unclear the exact extent of damage to the bricks-and-mortar retail sector. But, any analyst will tell you, it will be significant.

Of course, for brands, that means having to work harder to differentiate themselves via their digital presence. And, in many cases, that involves expanding into new markets.

As stores become virtual, traditional physical relationships between consumer and brands have loosened. Meanwhile the digital relationship has spread across a much wider geographical footprint into new regions and markets.

But, for all the current uncertainty and upheaval, these bonds can actually become stronger too. The opportunities are huge for brands which can create an eCommerce environment that engages and inspires consumers in the context of their own cultural understanding. And creating the ultimate customer experience, whether physical or digital, is always at the heart of any long-term brand-consumer relationship.

However, when eCommerce platforms look to launch in new territories, it requires much more than a "cut-and-paste" approach. Creative customer-facing marketing content needs to be culturally adapted (or "transcreated") rather than just translated if it is to engage customers in the same ways as it did in its original version.

Social media strategies need to be defined according to local demographics and linguistic trends which continue to evolve. Websites require regionally-focused search engine optimization. Content management systems necessitate integration with payment platforms and translation software systems.

In short, it gets complicated. That's why we've produced this shortlist of the ten key steps for localizing an eCommerce platform. So let's start at the beginning...

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## 1. Outline the scope

Of course, any strategic approach to localizing an eCommerce platform for a new territory begins with outlining the scope of the project, its key deliverables and goals.

If an eCommerce site exists in an original source language version, it is useful to carry out a full linguistic and functional review of the current platform. This can identify:

- The types and volumes of content (text and images)
- The content management system
- Marketing via adverts, promotions, social media and email campaigns
- SEO strategy and performance
- Connectivity between the eCommerce platform and CRM systems
- Any current translation management systems
- Payment systems
- Brand guidelines
- Systems connecting to logistics and stock control
- After sales and customer care

All these elements need to be identified at the outset. This data will form the basis of decisions as to what elements of the current eCommerce platform can be adapted for a localized version, and what need to be created from scratch for a new market.

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## 2. Market research

Comprehensive market research is often an undervalued element of eCommerce localization strategies. If products, content and eCommerce platforms have been successful in one region, some brands have surmised that their translated replicas will surely work elsewhere.

Sadly, this approach is rarely vindicated. Instead, the strategies which have proven to have greatest success have almost always involved detailed market research. Very often, this research involves three key elements.

- **General information gathering:** A full analysis of the target region/country demographics can be conducted, often in relation to the target retail sector, but not always exclusively so. This can use both quantitative and qualitative research methods (for example, probability sampling and qualitative research).
- **Projection and possible market penetration strategy:** This looks at social, economic, consumer and industry trends within the target sector so as to identify marketing requirements and opportunities.
- **Tactical and logistics planning:** This focuses on specific market information relating to the import of products, promotion, distribution, price decisions and marketing plans.

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### 3. Competitor research

Of course, any prospective eCommerce localization strategy should include comprehensive competitor research, which will highlight market opportunities as well as areas in which direct competition may be inadvisable within the current timeframe. Competitor intelligence can be gathered via secondary desk research focusing on the eCommerce offerings of brands offering similar products/services or those targeting the same demographic. Primary research can also use focus groups or interviews with customers to gain more qualitative insight into customer preferences, opinions and eCommerce habits relating to competitors.

Identifying competitors and analysing their market share (both physical and online) is of course the first stage in this process. Online presence and social media footprint should be analysed systematically to identify key differentiators for each competitor brand. Their marketing exposure in the territory also needs to be assessed, including advertising presence and the influence of local social media influencers on the target market.

By making a comprehensive inventory of the competitors' product ranges in the region (with reference to style, quality and price points), it is much easier to identify potential gaps in the market and untapped opportunities.

Not least, it is also crucial to understand the promotional strategy of each brand. What are the different kinds of promotions that take place, how are they delivered and how often? Where possible, retrospective research into the frequency and nature of promotional activities can be carried out via retrospective analysis of brands' social media activities.

Once the above research has been completed, a detailed report on competitor intelligence can be compiled which informs the development of an eCommerce localization strategy.

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### 4. Product creation/selection/promotion

For any eCommerce platform targeting new markets, it is essential that the most appropriate product lines (and individual products) are available for targeted consumer groups. Informed by market data, competitor intelligence and industry trends, a localization provider can provide in-country insight to help a client make an informed selection from its current product portfolio. Where appropriate, it can also advise on the creation of new products (or the adaptation of existing products) specifically tailored to the target market.

Using regional cultural calendars and customs, it is also important to identify which products are most suitable for promotion at which points in the commercial season. As with other elements of an eCommerce strategy, product creation, selection and promotion needs to be reviewed on an ongoing basis.

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## 5. Content creation

In the online world, photos and images provide consumers with the “look” of products or a brand. However it is the written content and description that provides its “feel” in the absence of the physical store.

Businesses convey their core values through the kind of language they use to describe their products and their brand tone of voice. That’s why, very often, it is not sufficient to simply translate high-profile customer-facing content from the source language into the target language.

In marketing contexts, content often makes use of specific cultural references, idiomatic language, humour and word play. In such cases, word-for-word translation will lack local impact. Alternatively, the content can be “transcreated”, a process in which translators who are also copywriters creatively adapt the content to convey the same core message using relevant cultural or linguistic references.

Another option to maximize the impact of high-level customer-facing content on eCommerce sites is to use copywriters in the target language. Given a set of style guidelines and a product brief, these in-country experts create content from scratch which is targeted specifically at local audiences.

Forms of content creation (using transcreation or multilingual copywriting services) can include:

- Product descriptions
- Web content
- Emails
- Banners
- Advertisements
- Brochures
- Press releases
- Social media
- Adaptation of existing content

In addition to the text content, photographs, infographics, videos and other visual elements need full localization. This includes awareness of the cultural relevance of colour and of any censorship rules in the region.

As part of an effective eCommerce localization strategy, a workflow should be created which manages the process of moving from client briefs, through to content creation, approval and implementation. Working with a large number of new and updated products promoted across different online and social media channels is a process that requires precise project management from a robust platform that is also flexible enough to respond to ad hoc demands.

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## 6. Search engine optimization (SEO)

Ensuring the visibility of any eCommerce site is of course critical to its success. It is calculated that the first page of Google search results captures between 71 and 92% of all web traffic generated by searches. Ranking in the second page generates just 6% of traffic.

It is important to remember that search engine optimization (SEO) localization is a complex process which needs to take account of many factors. Simply translating the content (and relevant keywords) is very rarely enough to ensure high visibility and premium ranking.

Effective SEO localization begins by establishing the traffic generated by specific keywords on the existing eCommerce site, alongside what limitations there are to site modifications and set-up. A plan is then devised, based on the capacity of the new site to be structured for good SEO. At times, it may be necessary to recommend a new site set-up if the options are too limited for effective SEO.

Localization for an eCommerce site helps to ensure that the site is SEO friendly by making certain that the following elements are addressed:

- All URLs are fully translated and include keywords.
- Meta-data is in place, and used appropriately, including tags, OG text, etc.
- All text is readable by search engines.
- Keyword density is appropriate.
- Text is easy to read.
- CSS is appropriately deployed.
- Social media is fully integrated.

In particular, a localization provider will conduct detailed analysis of the relevant keywords and terms that are trending in searches in the target region. These are very often different from translations of source language keywords and terms, and any translations or created content need to be adjusted accordingly.

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## 7. Platform and technology

An eCommerce platform can integrate many different technical elements including websites, online payment systems, content management systems and digital asset management systems.

When localizing such a platform, a technology review helps to identify the most appropriate technology platforms which can be used together in the new target market(s). The process begins by looking at optimization and any usability issues in the toolset. This will involve the creation of a set of reports analysing the effectiveness of the existing setup and including proposals for optimization.

Reports should detail:

- Website usability per language
- Platform usability per language
- Monetization usability per language
- Digital asset management effectiveness
- Content management system effectiveness

From there, the aim is to create a positive user experience, including the visuals of the site, the customer journey, and the security of the site as a whole. This process includes ensuring that the site is fully optimized for mobile devices, and that all links and processes work effectively. Where appropriate, navigation is optimized for right-to-left content.

Alongside the user experience, the focus is to enable a full localization system, meaning that a site can be translated from one language into another in a streamlined way using the appropriate tools and systems. Alongside content connectors for text, a set-up stage is appropriate where images can be swiftly replaced and tagged appropriately in the target language.

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## 8. Logistics

Any eCommerce platform needs to integrate seamlessly with the logistics function in the new target market. Specifically this includes arrangements for stock control, warehousing, ordering, payment, delivery and returns.

Whether stock is stored and distributed from within the target market or from overseas, all communications related to ordering, payment, delivery and returns need to be localized for specific markets.

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## 9. After sales and customer care

The importance of localization does not end once the purchase is completed. Providing a comprehensive localized after-sales and customer care package plays an important role in driving repeat business and creating brand loyalty. The process aims at ensuring all customers are valued, all issues are resolved and continuous relevant follow-up is made in a timely manner.

Comprehensive and carefully localized “Help” and “Frequently asked questions” sections on a website help to minimize the amount of personalized communications required to deal with customer queries.

However, many brands employ localization providers to manage customer queries, route them to the relevant online information if available, or respond in a personalized message if appropriate. The level of such ongoing support should be determined as part of an overall eCommerce localization package and monitored for its effectiveness.

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## 10. Measurements and analytics

It has been said that what gets measured gets managed. In the eCommerce world, there are a huge variety of metrics (and tools for providing such metrics) that can provide valuable insight into performance and how it can be optimized. In fact, the amount of available data can often lead to information overload.

The strategy, therefore, is to identify the key metrics which determine whether a localized eCommerce site is performing effectively. For each target market, the three most important to identify are:

- Increase in market penetration
- Increase in spend versus increase in revenue
- Profitability

Of course, these metrics will begin lower and – hopefully – build over time. The timeframes and targets are another element of the localization eCommerce strategy that needs to be determined at the outset, monitored continuously, and adjusted according to relevant factors.

Other metrics that can be extremely useful to monitor include:

- Brand awareness
- Website visitors
- Number of transactions
- Store visitors/footfall

Other measurements can be used, but care needs to be taken in making sure that the measurements and analysis are relevant, and not too time-consuming or costly to produce, reducing effectiveness and profit.

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## The final word

eCommerce may be the “new normal”, but that doesn’t mean it is the same for everyone. Far from it. Every eCommerce localization strategy should of course be tailored to the specific brand and the specific market it is looking to enter. That’s why we call it localization. But we hope this brief overview of the ten key steps in effective eCommerce localization has given you some food for thought about how your brand might adapt its eCommerce platform to new cultures and contexts.

We’d love to talk to you more about any of these issues. Please [get in touch](#) and we’ll be happy to sit round the (for now) virtual table for an open and honest discussion about what eCommerce localization could do for you and your brand.

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