

Going Global Online: Monitoring your Cultural Presence in Cyberspace

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A major corporation hires the best technologists it can find to create a specialized website to serve its clients. The site is functionally superb, easily navigable, colorful, fun, and full of surprises. It is also full of surprises that their clients do not expect. Produced by the twenty-something, electronic whiz kids at the ad agency, it is laden with insider humor, innuendo and assumptions not shared by its target population. Symbols and images are easily misunderstood, and, in one case, culturally insulting. Several links take the user to the edge of pornography. In short, many thousands of dollars are being spent to develop a website that is technically brilliant and *culturally-incompetent*.

We hope this is not the situation for your website. Better late than never, the company in this story hired an interculturalist to review the site before it went online. More money was spent to re-orient the site effectively to its target population.

Let's review some of the cultural opportunities and hazards of creating an electronic presence, and outline some useful tips for those who would create interfaces for their organization on the public Internet, on industry or corporate intranets, or put online forums and knowledge management systems in place.

Electronic Presence

Websites, forums and news groups on the public Internet are generally speaking available to anyone in the world with a phone line and an Internet connection. In some cases, passwords, subscription policies, etc. are used to protect the information by limiting access to the site to those who have reason to be there.

Intranets and knowledge management systems (they can be synonymous in some cases) are intended to be insider resources. They exist inside organizations on secure servers and access is usually limited to those who are either on the network or have highly protected dialup procedures for accessing them.

Audience

So what does one needs to ask in designing such a site or system and deciding where to place it online? The first key questions are about its target audience.

- Who needs to see, use interact with or contribute to this information? Who must be let in for it to fulfill its purpose.
- Who needs to be kept out? In whose hands will the information found on this site be damaging to the security, goals and objectives of the organization that hosts it or be misleading or damaging to the audience itself?
- Who might be looking in, nonetheless?

Answering these questions is not as simple as one might imagine. A customer service site, for example, might be aimed at helping customers get quick answers to their questions or problems with the organization's products or services. It should be technically easy for them to access and be culturally transparent.

On the other hand, the same organization might host a very private site or forum, for example, for its engineers or customer service professionals. Here the frank discussion of the products or services aimed at improving their quality, delivery, or other features might be inappropriate or misleading for the average customer to see. Such a site may be deeply steeped in the culture of its users and seem unintelligible or strange to outsiders.

Who is in and who is out may be determined by limited access areas on the same site as, for example, when an organization may be employing consultants from competing organizations and be receiving proprietary information from one of them that should not be passed on to others.

Needless to say, even restricted sites that might be somehow shown to or visited by outsiders need to be "squeaky-clean" from a cultural and ethical perspective.

Technical and Cultural Solutions

These questions are at once technical and human. They require software solutions and cultural competence. This usually means that the design team should include professionals of both realms as well as representatives of the end user populations.

Once the question of intended audience is answered, the parameters of the cultural interface between creators and users of the site come into focus. Managing cultural differences in a virtual environment requires a thorough understanding of the principles of intercultural communication, as well as how these principles need to be applied and, in some cases, modified because of the peculiar nature of virtual collaboration. For the moment, however, let's look at some of the issues that very directly affect site design.

Visuals and Color

The selection of visuals can be a critical issue. Is a symbol or image understandable to all users? It might surprise many Americans to know that the small yellow file folder used on graphic operating systems to contain individual files does not look like a file folder in many parts of the world. As a matter of fact, it doesn't even look much like the hang file folders we ourselves normally use today.

While the function of the folder icon is quickly learned, not all images may be so easy to fathom. A British consulting company used a snapshot of *All Sorts*, a kind of colorful licorice candy, to symbolize the category of "miscellaneous." Colorful and playful, they said exactly the right thing--to an UK audience. In many parts of the world, however, they meant nothing, and even precipitated long discussions about what they might be.

These first two examples may be relatively trivial. The ante goes up, however, when symbols or images are truly inappropriate, confusing, or even insulting to their intended audience. One manufacturer used the symbol of an automobile on a button, next to one with the symbol of a hand, to indicate that one button was used to indicate "automatic" downloading, while the other was "manual" or customized. Large numbers of users had no idea of what was meant by these symbols and pushed the wrong buttons. You might think that using both the symbol and a word describing the function beneath it would resolve this problem. Yet confusion remains for those who find a dissonance between the image and the text, e.g., between automobile and automatic.

While a Jewish or Israeli organization has every right to flaunt the Mogen David, someone invested in doing business with the Islamic world who uses miniature six-pointed stars as a fancy bullet points in texts for this market should know what they are getting into.

The advertising industry has been very sensitive to color and color combinations in marketing and wrapping products. Given a particular target audience, certain colors may recommend themselves more than others, and some might be actively avoided. Beware of looking like someone else's flag, if that is not your intention. Years ago we assigned the task of designing a US diversity product to a Chinese American artist. The artist, oblivious to how African Americans might react, assigned the color black to symbolize the most negative outcome.

Lethal Links

Many products, services, networks and other connections are served by site links in website and other online information media that take the user, with the click of a mouse, to other interesting and useful sites. It is important to realize that when you create a link to someone else's site you become associated with that site in the minds of those who travel to it from your page.

You may strive to be culturally-sensitive and competent, but you can forfeit a good reputation in the eye of the beholder by linking yourself to someone who is not. Technically and culturally speaking, links need to be regularly inspected and updated, because you have no idea when the site you are linked to may change its structure or the content, or even worse, the cultural quality of the information on its page. In addition, you have little or no control over links that go in the opposite direction. Consequently, when someone links their site to yours, it is important that your site be of the highest integrity and competence.

Language and Ownership

What language(s) should a site appear in? If English, whose English? There are more non-native speakers of English in the world than native ones. Again, we need to ask, "Who's it for?" A site intended for more than one anglophone culture, or for large numbers of ESL speakers needs to reign in extravagant words, idioms, slang, and turns of phrase. Similes and metaphors need to be examined for their intelligibility and appropriateness across cultures and languages. For example, if you are "walking on your eyebrows," are you surprised, fatigued, or insulted.? If you are Dutch, you are fatigued, but the rest of the world will not know it if you say it that way.

Are technical terms explained if non-technical users will be in the audience? Are measuring systems explained or multiple systems employed, e.g., inches and centimeters?

We are still a long way from machine translation, not only because language is so complex, but because it is the bearer of cultural identity and values. When Yahoo, for example diversified its search engines, it was careful on one hand to preserve a look that linked the various national Yahoos together. At the same time it gave maximum freedom to developers in other nations to provide native commentary and details to its website audience.

Besides intrinsic understandability, the choice of a language or kind of language can indicate who is in power, and, exclude others from participation in the information or discussion or ownership of the effort and the results. If I am part of a process and kept from full involvement, it will not be surprising if I fail to identify with it or even resist it.

Thus, your web site can be graphically, technically and culturally competent if the variables mentioned above are taken into careful consideration. Your site can be even as successful as that of Cisco Systems (<http://www.cisco.com>) which is translated into over 12 languages and is culturally analyzed for each of its target countries. Cisco is one the leaders in electronic commerce, selling its networking products to a worldwide market.

[E.F. Sheridan](#) of [THE WEB OF CULTURE](#) and [George Simons](#) of [George Simons International](#) offer cross-cultural analysis of Internet websites and corporate Intranets.

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