So punk, do you feel lucky?

Cultural values and web site design

A Great Britain based cell phone company tries to interest potential customers for its latest model with the following text on its web site:

“its 3AM and its hot and busy, most of my lot have crept off home. Lightweights! But maybe not… There’s a text on my J530… The phone looks great in here… Cool backlight…”

Elsewhere on the site the company offers users the possibility of playing a game, Kombat Club. This is what Kombat Club is about:

“These streets are mean. The fighting is dirty. Life here is dark. So are you ready to challenge friends and enemies to an all-out street fight?….. And if you are the meanest, get your moniker graffitied on the walls.
So punk, do you feel lucky?”

Reading the texts convinced me that this telephone was not for me. I have no intention to use my telephone at 3 am in hot places, or to paint my tag on the wall. The tone, the graphics, the approach to me as a potential customer I find appalling rather than appealing. This company is spreading its operations across 30 countries, including mine. Is it my nationality, my age, my gender, my income, or my personal set of values that makes me reject the message and hence the product?

Although the World Wide Web started as a mainly European and North American initiative, the number of people online in other parts of the world has grown rapidly. CyberAtlas, a site with lots of statistics on international web use, reports that not the United States but Sweden is this year’s most web-savvy country, and that South Korea tops the list of high-speed web households. In absolute numbers, the US internet population is the biggest (166 million in 2002), followed by China (57 million), Japan (51 million), and Germany (32 million). These numbers make internet entrepreneurs eager. But to become a successful global player, they must look beyond the numbers and reconsider their marketing approach and communication for countries and languages other than their own.

Internationalizing, translating or localizing

The first step on the way to global business is internationalizing the site and making it usable for international audiences. This includes such basic things as making sure that transaction forms allow ‘foreign’ names, zip codes, and countries and offer room for international telephone numbers. The site should also be adapted for the different currency formats, date formats, units of measurement, and alphabetic orderings of the target audiences and countries (Yunker, 2003).

The next step is the language: For two-thirds of the internet users, English is a foreign language (Global Reach, 2002), and not necessarily one that they understand very well. The comprehension problems associated with reading a foreign language will affect the ease of use and the appeal of the site, and hence the impression of the products presented. On the other hand, the use of English or any other international language might be associated with a particular desirable lifestyle (Gerritsen et al., 2000; Warden et al., 2002).
Finally, a company might decide to localize its site, that is: to create a special version for each target country or group. Localization goes beyond internationalization and translation when the site is adapted to fit in with the ways the target audiences think, feel, and act. Figures 1a – 1d show localized sites of Nokia, an originally Finnish mobile phone manufacturer. The country sites have some similarities, but are at the same time widely diverse, even for different language groups within one country, such as the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgians (1a and 1b).

Do the Nokia subsidiaries assume that Dutch-speaking Belgians like subdued colors better than their French-speaking neighbors? That Singaporean customers need a simpler navigation scheme and a less cluttered screen than Czech customers? Other well-known Internet entrepreneurs, such as Amazon.com, have chosen to standardize their international web sites, as we can see by comparing the German and the Japanese Amazon sites (Figures 2a and 2b). Users know what to expect, not only in terms of language and graphic design, but also in terms of transactions and interaction.

What is more effective when communicating with international audiences: creating trust by sending the message that the company has sincere concerns for and a real interest in the international customer? Or creating security, by acting in a consistent way, even across international borders? Does localization, which is a very costly operation, indeed matter? And if so, what values matter most for the wide variety of audiences that are to be addressed through the sites?
Cultural differences and underlying values

The most frequently cited authority on cultural differences is Geert Hofstede (1980, 1997, 2001). Through an extensive survey among IBM employees in the 1970s, Hofstede found that differences among countries could be described using five independent value dimensions:

- Power distance (PDI): how cultures deal with human inequality;
- Uncertainty avoidance (UAI): how cultures cope with uncertainty about the future;
- Individualism/Collectivism (IDV): how cultures perceive the relationship between the individual and the collectivity;
- Masculinity and femininity (MAS): how cultures deal with the duality of the sexes and consequential gender roles;
- Long-term and short-term orientation (LTO): how cultures distinguish themselves by their long-term or short-term thinking.

The five dimensions have been used in hundreds of studies, particularly on work- and organization-related differences and on consumer behavior (see Hofstede’s 2001 book for an overview). There has always been a lively debate on the methodology and validity of the Hofstede dimensions. Yet numerous studies have shown statistically significant correlations between the position of countries on the dimensions on the one hand, and the values or actions of its citizens on the other. So these dimensions might be a valuable foundation for thinking about the culturability (usability for various cultures) of web sites. It can help predict what is user-friendly for particular cultures.

Culture’s consequences for web sites

Marcus & Gould (2000) used Hofstede’s dimensions of culture and predicted how they might affect web user interface design. As an illustration, let’s see how that worked out for the dimension Individualism/Collectivism. Individualism (in the words of Marcus and Gould) implies loose ties; everyone is expected to look after oneself or one’s immediate family but no one else. Collectivism implies that people are integrated from birth into strong cohesive groups that protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. Marcus and Gould translate those differences into guidelines for user interface and web design. Some of their assumptions are summarized in Table 1.
Table 1  A selection of aspects of user interface and web site design related to IND/COL (Marcus and Gould, 2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation based on personal achievement</th>
<th>Individualistic cultures</th>
<th>Collectivistic cultures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstration of success</td>
<td>Maximized</td>
<td>Underplayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of social morality</td>
<td>Truth</td>
<td>Truth relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on change</td>
<td>New and unique</td>
<td>Tradition and history</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the guidelines, Figure 3 and its accompanying text should go down well with a collectivistic culture, whereas Figure 4 would be more appropriate for a more individualistic culture. But how to interpret the differences when you know that the two pictures come from the same cell phone site (Sanyo), and illustrate descriptions of very similar telephones (types 5300 and 8100)?

The long lists of guidelines Marcus and Gould offer for fine-tuning web sites to cultures have a very small basis of empirical evidence. We do know that culture matters in many different ways. Warden et al. (2002) showed that language of origin, as opposed to English, mattered for product appreciation in e-commerce sites. Dormann and Chisalita (2002) demonstrated that people from countries that scored high on Hofstede's femininity dimension liked web designs for home pages with feminine values better. Duncker (2002) did an ethnographic study that demonstrated that the library metaphor did not work well for Maoris, because the concept behind the metaphor clashed with their traditional tribal knowledge repositories. On the other hand, Norton (2002) showed that South African users from very diverse groups did not need adapted versions of a report-viewing web application. Could it be that the extended computer experience of the participants in that last study overshadowed any cultural preferences? Are we creating a 'general web culture' that works well for everyone, simply because we are used to it?

Invitation

Personally I would love to investigate the value of Marcus & Gould’s assumptions in a systematic way. The guidelines
and directions they have formulated may have face validity, but they lack empirical evidence. If we could create a group of people from research institutions around the world that were willing to work on it, we might be able to start a project bottom-up. So, if you are interested and see a chance to do some research in your home country, please feel free to get in touch with me: t.m.vandergeest@utwente.nl

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