



# Keep Your Site Competitive

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**T**he Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Thomas L. Friedman aptly titled his recent national bestseller *The World Is Flat*. What does a flat world mean to companies both large and small? An obvious answer is “globalization”—especially when we think of the Web. Globalization provides a simple and tidy way for a company to neatly package and compartmentalize its Web presence and goods. This, in turn, will give each and every company a key to the world—or will it?

How can any given company gain a competitive edge online in a world that has gone flat? As Friedman advocates, to gain a competitive edge—or even survive—a company must assert a “level of uniqueness.” For the global Web site, this translates into a call to establish a unique presence, localized for the target culture(s).

If you are part of a smaller company or a mom-and-pop organization, time and capital may not be readily available to obtain a research company’s intensive analysis. Or perhaps your organization does not see the need to invest in cultural research. If you follow some simple steps to generate cultural awareness in your team, however, you can improve your site’s usability, credibility, and bottom line.

Many technical communicators, designers, and marketers in the fields of advertising and Web design are familiar with the need to analyze their client’s market. Two types of analysis are widely used today: *competitive analysis*, which involves direct competitors; and *landscape analysis*, which involves companies that are in (or aspire to enter) the same field as their client. In addition, I would like to propose *cultural analysis*.

Cultural analysis involves information architecture, usability, content, graphics, credibility, technology, and interactive design. Although a team may analyze some of these elements during a competitive analysis, it will gain a higher level of cultural sensitivity via a cultural analysis.

## Information Architecture

A business can leverage many strategic opportunities through a site’s information architecture, which deals with not only the site’s taxonomy, but also its organization. The layout must make sense to the user.

When planning a site, considering the layout is paramount. For instance, one of the arts of information architecture involves integrating content priorities, as assessed by a business team. It is necessary to decide what part of a Web page is considered “prime real estate” for each culture in question.

Assess the door by which your users enter. For example, your organization may use a splash screen as a global gateway, offering different language options to users from different countries. Your team may want to reassess this common method of globalizing sites, however. Many users do not like this option because it adds cookies to their computers; they will simply delete or turn off the cookies.

Be aware of perceptions and categorizations of seemingly simple things such as the home. When a major U.S. detergent company conducted a usability test on its site, it categorized stains by the room in which the stain was created. The company’s categorization of rooms, however, differed from some users’ idea of a home in different countries. Users

in the United States expected separate categories for the living room and dining room. They also expected many room categories—such as a playroom, nursery, bathroom, office/den, kitchen/dining, garage/shop, and laundry/basement—in keeping with the spacious homes of many Americans. But in India, people often live in smaller spaces, sometimes shared with an extended family. Many Indian users might expect fewer room categories—for example, a combined living/dining area, bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom. Therefore, Americanized room categories may not be appropriate in India.

The navigation system is another important element of site architecture. Menu conventions such as pull-down menus or the placement of global navigation (uniform across the whole site) as opposed to local navigation (specific to a particular page) can have different connotations for users from different countries. The overall placement of key elements affects site usability considerably.

## Usability

Usability is also a critical part of site design. Usability experts’ rules of thumb are numerous, so it seems unnecessary to create our own list here. But be aware that usability guidelines should not be considered universal truths. In focusing on the relationship between usability and culture, it is important to understand that readability and legibility are relative to the site’s language, and appropriate text size and font type will change accordingly.

It is also important to plan for “text swell” when translating a site. For instance, the word *e-mail* translates into the

French phrase *courrier électronique*, which requires much more real estate. Translation considerations, in turn, affect spacing and the general allotment of the different elements of each Web page.

As a side note—although I am not a proponent of the idea that one solution will fit all—I do believe that a site will have a higher acceptance rate if the initial home site is created with globalization in mind (including appropriate selections of text and graphics, to name two issues).

### Content

Translating site content is usually one of the first issues that comes to mind when thinking about globalization and localization. Translation is a complex endeavor that requires more than the word-for-word renderings that machine translators such as Babel Fish can provide. That said, free machine translation is a viable first step for organizations that are strapped for cash. But once your organization decides to enter the international market, it is advisable to consider human translation. At the very least, someone who speaks the target language should look over your first (machine) draft, since words can have many different meanings and usages. For instance, in English, the word “hot” can describe temperature, spiciness, or good looks. In Korea, temperature, spiciness, and good looks have three different descriptors.

Another important element to assess is a site’s use of metaphor. The shopping cart metaphor may confuse German users, who predominantly use baskets while shopping. Even seemingly simple concepts—such as the home—may need reworking for local markets (as the detergent company’s study in India revealed).

It is also necessary to analyze types of data such as dates, times, currency, large numbers, measurements, punctuations, addresses, and phone numbers. For example, when using two digits each to represent the year, month, and day, the actual date might not be obvious, since it can be written as DD/MM/YY, MM/DD/YY, or YY/MM/DD. With regard to large numbers, 2,222 and 2.222 may

mean the same thing in two different countries. When creating a visual representation of such data fields, keep in mind that you should also label what each unit field should contain.

### Graphics

Your team will also benefit from the awareness of cross-cultural differences in visual conventions such as symbols and icons. For example, the file folder commonly used in the U.S. to indicate a single place where information is compiled may not be a worldwide concept.

Be aware that users in different locales associate colors with different meanings. To promote its rental car services in Japan, Hertz sent out black envelopes containing promotional material. This did not go over well since, in Japan, black envelopes portend a letter conveying someone has died. Cultural sensitivity to colors and their connotations can help your team deliver its message more effectively.

Also, when analyzing images to publish on the Web site, you must consider the country’s value system. In some countries, such as China, showing too much skin can be offensive. This cultural *faux pas* can affect a site’s credibility.

### Credibility

B. J. Fogg, a Stanford researcher, has extensively studied Web site credibility in the United States. His study of about 4,500 people indicates the criteria Americans use when assessing the trustworthiness of a site. Users said that credible sites should show the people who are behind the scenes. According to these users, the credibility of a company Web site is boosted if it shows images and quotes of happy employees.

But although this may work for a Western company, it may not for other cultures. For instance, in certain Eastern countries such as Japan, where masculine images such as buildings connote power, pictures of employees may actually weaken the company’s image.

### Technology

Issues of credibility are also directly correlated with the technology that is available to the target culture.

The technology team must be aware that countries have quite different levels of Internet maturity. These differences translate into technological issues such as download times, coding efforts, database issues, file types, naming conventions of files, and search engine optimization. If the target country’s Internet maturity is two years behind the U.S., the lag will affect file types such as *Flash* components, software versions, and the most important issue—user download times.

The World Wide Web Consortium, better known as W3C, is developing best practices for creating multilingual sites. W3C suggests that developers use XHTML/CSS. Although it is not recommended that you use this as your only tool for planning your site’s back end, XHTML/CSS is a common denominator for different versions of a site.

### Interactive Design

When it comes to the general Web habits of a user, different cultures have different cultural norms. For example, the way users buy products online may differ across cultures. When dealing with the shopping experience, it is important to assess how the user moves from one transaction to another. As previously mentioned, a shopping cart icon



**Figure 1. Creating a spreadsheet with primary categories and relevant subcategories is a simple way for your team to conduct a cultural analysis.**

<b>Company: Culture</b>	
<b>Technology:</b>	(areas of concern e.g.)
	SEO (search engine optimization)
	File Types
	Naming conventions of files
	Download times
	Data base issues

may confuse users who do not see shopping carts in the stores they frequent.

In addition, your team should consider how users are going to pay for a product or service. Online shoppers in the U.S. commonly use credit cards; however, in Germany, shoppers may prefer money orders. Another viable option is the PayPal service, which mediates payment online for a small service fee.

**Conducting a Cultural Analysis**

Clearly, the above list of cultural analysis components does not cover everything your team will need to create the most effective localized site possible, but it will definitely help you argue for and complete a cultural analysis of your organization’s Web site.

A simple way for your team to conduct such an analysis is to create a spreadsheet that lists the main categories mentioned above. You can then add relevant subcategories, as shown in Figure 1.

Then, write down the cultural considerations relating to these categories and subcategories. Not all subcategories will necessarily apply to all cultures. For example, text swell will be a consideration (and should be a subcategory) when localizing for France, but not when local-

izing for Japan. Using such a spreadsheet will help your team question the conventions of particular cultures, and thus effectively localize the site. It can also help when you are trying to keep subcultures (such as teenagers, businesspeople, or seniors) in mind as you globalize a site.

**A Competitive Edge in a Flat World**

The bottom line: Refuse to take a particular culture for granted when you are globalizing or localizing your site. Even if your team is on a budget or your company cannot invest in a comprehensive site localization study, it is important to conduct a cultural analysis, which, in the long run, will help you smoothly transition your site into a foreign market. It will also give your company the competitive edge needed in this otherwise flat world. ❶

SUGGESTED READINGS

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