Maximizing Visibility for Multilingual Web Sites

by Huiping Iler
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Executive Summary

Going global is not an act of good will — it is a smart and necessary business strategy. Establishing a global web presence provides one of the most affordable means of tapping into the international marketplace. An information-rich, well-published web site sells your products and services to potential clients around the world 24/7. In addition, multilingual content optimizes the effectiveness of your site by communicating with your customers in their language.

However, many multilingual web sites are not as effective as they could be because potential customers cannot find them using search engines. Because search engines typically provide over 87% of the traffic to a web site, companies that do not optimize their sites for search are missing opportunities to reach customers. This white paper addresses challenges unique to translated web sites for ranking high on search engines.

About wintranslation.com

wintranslation.com is a professional translation company based in Ontario, Canada. It has been serving clients across North America in over 100 languages since it was established in 1998. wintranslation.com's services include document translation, glossary development, foreign language keyword research, translator/copywriter selection and recruitment, multilingual desktop publishing and web site quality assurance testing.

Contact phone: +1 613 686 1278
E-mail: huiping.iler@wintranslation.com

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Introduction

The potential in the global marketplace is huge.

One billion people will have access to the Internet by the end of 2006; 70 percent of these people will speak a language other than English.

There are 128 million Chinese speaking Internet users alone. This is predicted to double within the next five years. Studies show that these Internet users are just like the rest of us: they rely heavily on websites in their native language to perform most tasks. What does this mean for businesses with websites trying to reach these markets? Something many companies are not paying enough attention to: localization.

In order to reach non-English speaking markets, businesses need to have websites that speak to their target audience in their language.

As German Chancellor Willy Brandt once said, "If I am selling to you, I speak your language. If I am buying from you, dann müssen Sie in meiner Sprache sprechen." (Translation: then you must speak my language.)

The value of web content, especially multilingual content, has never been as great as it is today. It is the medium through which your customers interact with you on the web. Whether it is booking a train ticket, sending a request for quote or comparing product features, your customers don't see your physical presence, just your content. Your content stands in the frontline and represents your organization. For a web marketer, content is one of the most valuable business assets. Quality content can sell merchandises, deliver services, and build brands.

If your organization has invested in building great content, you must also actively promote it to maximize its visibility. Making it a best-kept secret doesn't exactly do your content justice. "Launching a web site is a bit like building a store at the North Pole. Nobody knows you're there unless you are actively promoting the site," says Gerry McGovern, author of *Content Critical*.

Studies have shown visibility on search engines is one of the best ways to promote online content. Yet most companies miss potential customers by not effectively promoting their web site through the search engines. The problem is even more common for multilingual sites. Many well-localized web sites are not visited as frequently by international customers as they potentially could be because the sites do not appear in searches for that country/region or language.

This white paper addresses the challenges of maximizing visibility for multilingual web content. By following the best practices recommended in the white paper, companies can increase the number of potential customers who can locate their multilingual web sites through search engines.

Why Search Engines Matter

"Launching a web site is a bit like building a store at the North Pole. Nobody knows you're there unless you are actively promoting the site" says Gerry McGovern, author of Content Critical*.*

A 2003 Forrester Survey found that 87% of Internet users rely on search engines to locate information on the web. If you have a web site, but do not take advantage of referrals from search engines, you are missing a huge opportunity.

A company ambitious enough to localize their web site into 25 languages, but that does not optimize the sites for search, is as smart as a film studio that invested millions to make a brilliant movie, but did nothing to promote it.

In traditional business, Yellowpages are vital for many companies in attracting new customers. In the e-business world, search engines play a similar role. People browse, research, and buy products and services online by conducting searches. Just as businesses pay for advertising in the Yellow Pages, you need to allocate money and time for marketing to the search engines so that your sites achieve greater visibility.

Unlike the Yellowpages, where a business phone number ensures automatic inclusion in the telephone directory, putting up a web site does not ensure inclusion in the search engine index. A web site that is not included in a search engine index cannot be found using searches. However, you can easily get your site included by doing one or both of the following:

- submitting your site to a directory
- linking to another site that is already in the index

60% of searches are conducted in a language other than English. (iProspect, 2004)

Whether your web site is intended to generate leads, to increase sales, or to create awareness, you build it with business goals in mind. None of these goals can be reached until someone visits your site. Search engines are vital in drawing potential customers to your site, and it is important to understand how they work.

Top Rankings Are Serious Business

82% of search engine users expect to find the answer to their query on the first three pages of search matches. (iProspect, 2004)

Having your web site included in the indices is just the first step. According to an iProspect 2004 survey, 82% of search engine users expect to find the answer to their query on the first three pages of search matches. If your site does not have a position in the first three pages, you have very little chance of being found.
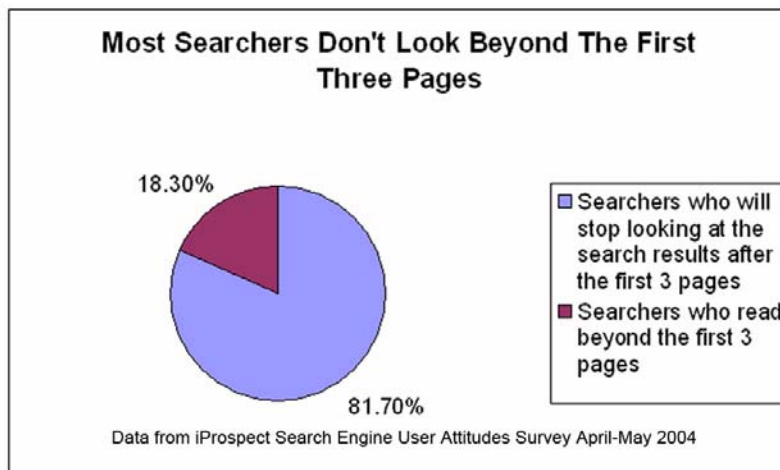

FIGURE 1. iProspect Survey Data

In the last several years, an entire industry has emerged to help companies achieve top rankings in the search engines. That industry is often called the Search Engine Optimization industry or the Search Engine Marketing industry.

Many of North America's leading corporations, such as IBM and Wal-mart, have hefty search engine marketing budgets. The high rankings of their web sites are the fruits of their labour and expensive investments. However, when web sites are translated into other languages, their high-rankings in English don't always transfer. Much of the search work can be undone by translators who have very little knowledge of how search engine marketing works. To prevent this from happening, we must first understand how web sites are ranked by search engines.

The Fundamentals of Site Ranking

Each of the major search engines, such as Google, Yahoo!, and MSN, has its own algorithms for determining which sites rank higher in the search results pages. A site placed highly on Yahoo! may not necessarily do so on Google. However, the ranking algorithms do have many things in common.

For example, early search engines, such as the original Excite or Altavista search engines, ranked pages based on page content, formatting, and metadata tags. They paid special attention to bold text, keywords, and summaries in the header code of an HTML document.

Of course, it did not take long for webmasters to figure this out. For several years, many sites achieved high rankings by stuffing their pages and meta tags with keywords. (Keywords are the frequently used search phrases that internet users use – you can look up a list of keywords by using a tool such as Word Tracker or Yahoo! Keyword Tool).

Some people even went as far as repeating a single keyword 10,000 times on a page. And, they were "smart" by displaying the text in white color on a white background so the reader could not see it, but the search engines would. In addition, spammers often use unrelated, but popular keywords to drive traffic to their sites.

As a result, search engines no longer trust the keywords on a page to determine its rank, only its relevance to a particular topic.

When Google came along it dramatically improved the quality of search results by being the first to use links as a ranking criteria. A site with many web sites linking to it has a better chance of ranking highly than a site with no links.

Look at it this way: when web site A links to web site B, webmaster A is saying to the world, "I think you should check out web site B." A human judgement is being made in the form of a link. By comparing links from site to site, both in its quality and quantity, Google is harvesting human thinking and judgements, then applying it to web site ranking.

Today, even though the specifics of ranking algorithm continue to evolve, the fundamentals remain unchanged. The two main factors for ranking a site are the text on the page and links to the web site.

Factors Affecting International Searches

International sites face added barriers to searches because of language, cultural, and learning style differences, as well as search methodologies. To achieve global visibility, your site must appear in the results for searches conducted in languages other than English, and for searches that are restricted based on country or region.

Language Filters

As a rule, people prefer search results in the languages they know. However, searchers in different countries have different preferences. For example, in a Scandinavian country like Sweden where many residents are fluent in English, people are as likely to conduct their searches in English as in Swedish. But in countries like China and Japan, where English is spoken less often, most searchers want results limited to their native language.

Your task is to make sure that search engines know the language of your page. If your page is not correctly identified, you could be losing valuable referrals because the page will be missing from searches that should have included it.

There are several different methods that search engines use to determine the language of your page:

- **Language Meta Tags** — Meta tags that clearly and correctly identify the language appear at the top of the HTML code view. Then, search engines can just check the tag and display the site for the appropriate languages. For example:

  ```
  <meta http-equiv="content-language" content="zh">
  ```
  indicates the language is in Chinese, while

  ```
  <meta http-equiv="content-language" content="zh,es">
  ```
  tells the search engine that the site is in Chinese and Spanish.

  Unfortunately, meta tag usage on the Internet is spotty at best, and even if sites use the tag, the syntax is often incorrect or the language designation is wrong. As a result, search engines look at the tag, but do not consider it the only factor when determining a site's language.

- **Character Encoding** — The character set identified in the HTML header that tells the browser how to correctly display the text on a site. For example:

  ```
  ...<meta http-equiv="content-type" content="text/html; charset=utf-8" />...
  ```
  If both the character set encoding and the language meta tags are correct, it's safe to assume that the site will display correctly in that language. However, most character sets encompass multiple languages. For example, a site encoded for the Latin-1 character set could be in English, Spanish, or French.

  While English and other Western European languages do not usually pose a challenge when it comes to proper text display, other languages like Arabic or Japanese need the appropriate character encoding meta tag in order to display properly. The following figures show examples of both incorrect and correct language and character set encoding.

In Fig. 2, note the question marks where characters should be.

For help in English call 1-800-123-4567.

Para ayuda en español, llame al + 1 123-456-7890.

????????? , ? ? ?????? + 1 123-456-7890.

??? ?????? ? +1 123-456-7890 ??? ?? ???? ?

????? ??? ?????? ?????? ???????? ???? ??????? ??? ????? +1 123-456-78

FIGURE 2. Incorrect Encoding

For help in English call 1-800-123-4567.

Para ayuda en español, llame al + 1 123-456-7890.

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FIGURE 3. Correct Encoding

- **Text Analysis** — The content of the page itself. If the search engine can determine the language through character patterns and content, it will classify the page in the proper language category.

Given the level of sophistication that search engines have attained, there is a good chance that your site's language will be discovered even if you do not do anything. Still, it never hurts to help the search engines as much as possible.

Country and Region Filters

In some situations, a searcher may prefer limiting their search results by country or region rather than language. For example, a Danish person may want to order a digital camera from a Netherlands-based company to avoid overseas shipping charges. The language filters of search engines do not really help searchers in that case.

Locale is the combination of language and culture that makes an area unique. For example, Switzerland has three main locales: French, German, and Italian areas.

A search for pages in German may bring up results from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. A search for pages in French may bring up results from France and Canada. And a search for pages in Spanish may bring up results from Mexico, Argentina, and Spain.

To solve this problem, most search engines apply country or region filters. Usually a default filter is enabled for local searches, or the search site offers searchers a choice between two or three filters such as country/region or language. Savvy searchers always have the option of using the advanced search interface to specify these filters.

FIGURE 4. Google China

So, how do the search engines decide which country your web pages come from? Two main factors come into play:

- the location of the server that hosts the site
- the site's domain name

Every web site has an IP address that reveals the country or region where the hosting server resides. Free online tools such as www.ip2location.com allow you to look up the geographic location of any given IP address. Country/region filters select web pages that are hosted on servers within the specified country/region.

Using a top-level domain such as .cn or .fr for country/ regional designation is the most search engine friendly way to achieve local visibility.

However, pages hosted outside a country/region can be included in a filter as well, if the domain name includes a country/region designation at the top level. For example, a .cn domain indicates the site is from China (e.g., www.google.cn), whereas a .tw domain indicates that the site is from Taiwan. A country/region filter for China includes pages from sites that have .cn domains, even if the site is actually hosted say, in Singapore.

This filtering mechanism poses a problem for companies that want to use the .com domain for all their web sites. For example, the Sun Microsystems' site is www.sun.com. Its Chinese site has a sub- domain of cn.sun.com. According to the search engine's country/region filter rules, all pages considered to be from China must be hosted locally or have a top-level domain of .cn. Sun's page does not meet the requirements because it is hosted centrally in the US, and only uses a sub domain rather than a top-level .cn domain. When a searcher limits results to pages from China, Sun's Chinese site will not be found. But when the searcher uses the language filter, the site will be included because it is in Chinese.

If you are concerned about searchers not being able to find your language pages, Don't panic yet. Experienced searchers are aware of the country/region and language filter issues and know to adjust their settings to find relevant results. Some search engines sometimes include sites that do not meet the hosting and domain requirements, but that have a good number of high-quality, in-country/ region links. However, that is the exception rather than the norm. Having a top-level domain and hosting your site in your target country/region are widely considered to be the most search engine friendly ways to achieve local visibility.

Understanding Keywords

Keywords are terms that users enter into the search engine when looking for information on the web. These terms are similar to the index terms that you find in a book or manual.

Keywords are critical to your search campaign. Ideally, the words you use on your site would exactly match the queries that customers use when they try to find sites. Unfortunately, it's extremely unlikely customers will base their searches on the words you have used in your site, unless you have optimized your site. So, your best strategy is to start with your customers, and to include on your site the words people use in their searches, even if those words are not as technically precise as the terminology used in the product documentation.

Using Words Your Customers Search For

Keyword research is the foundation and cornerstone of any search engine marketing effort. A site that uses popular keywords can be easily discovered, while one that does not may languish in obscurity. For example, you might know that notebooks and laptops are the same thing. But search engine spiders (small applications that mine the web for information) do not necessarily work that way. If searchers are looking for laptops, and your site only mentions "notebooks" and never uses the word "laptop", your page might not be found.

English has ~500,000 words, compared to French with ~300,000 and ~50,000 combined characters in all forms of Chinese (though Chinese has more than 50,000 spoken words).

If you have taken great care selecting your English keywords, the last thing you want is for your translation team to completely undo all your work by choosing obscure search terms, even though they may be technically accurate.

So how do you plan your keywords for your international language sites? The first challenge is that keyword research tools are not as abundant in other languages as they are in English. For example, the popular tool WordTracker is only available in English. Fortunately, there are some tools available that take the guesswork out of keyword planning.

One of the most useful resources is Yahoo! Keyword Selector Tool. This keyword tool provides valuable search data for 15 countries and 20 languages. When you check a word using Keyword Selector, it will tell you how many times the word and related terms were searched for during the last month. These data allow marketers to determine what words searchers use frequently.

FIGURE 5. Yahoo! Keyword Selector

Google also has a tool (adwords.google.com) that is similar to Yahoo!'s. The AdWords Keyword Tool supports 16 languages and 25 countries, but it does not disclose keyword demand figures — only an estimate of the number of clicks you'll receive.
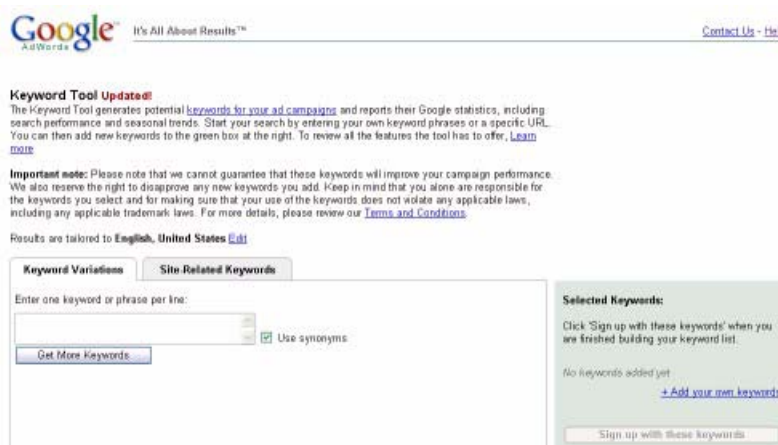

FIGURE 6. Google Keyword Tool

Besides the main international players like Google and Yahoo!, there are also regional search engines, some of which provide their own keyword research tools. For example, one of the most popular search portals in China is Baidu.com (www.baidu.com/). It offers marketers a tool to compare keyword popularity. Though it does not tell you the exact number of searches for a term, you can get a sense of which keywords have higher demands.

FIGURE 7. Baidu Keyword Rankings

"Since the search engines use a wide variety of factors to determine site rankings, optimizing a page to rank high is a cumulative effort." (Whalen, 2001)

While these keyword tools can help you start planning, you can improve the results even further by doing the following:

- **Think like your customer** — What words would someone use to search for products and services like yours? Do some brainstorming with your in-country/regional distributors or office staff and see what you come up with. Also consider including common misspellings in your keyword meta tags.

- **Understand how different search terms reflect different intentions** — People use different terminology based on where they are in their purchase cycle. Someone who searches for "digital camera" is probably in the research phase and not ready to buy. Someone who searches for Sony DSC V3 Cyber Shot Pro digital camera probably has a credit card ready to make a purchase.

- **Do some competitor research and find out what keywords they are targeting** — Meta keyword tags, found in the HTML header code, are usually a good place to start.

- **Analyze your traffic logs and find out which search terms are currently bringing people to your web site** — Traffic logs help you refine the keywords and meta tags that you use. Your web hosting company can provide you with your logs.

- **Run some Pay Per Click ads for your keyword terms** to see which ones are the most effective.

- **Review the search terms used on your internal search engine if you have one** — These data can show you not only what searchers look for the most often, but can also identify site design problems since a search term may tell you where people are getting lost.

Use Keywords Effectively For High Rankings

There are many aspects to making your site search engine friendly. In this paper, we are only discussing challenges of specific relevance to translated sites, particularly areas where your translators can have significant impact on the overall search friendliness.

72% of searchers are unhappy with the results of searches. Of those using language-specific filters, 83% are unhappy with the results of search. (Jupiter Research)

Search engine experts often talk about "on page" factors versus "off page" factors when it comes to search algorithms. Off-page factors refer to link quality and quantity, which we will cover in the next section. The on-page factors relate to effectively using your keywords, an area where your translators can make or break your international site.

So where should your keywords be placed? The following is a list widely recommended by search experts (in order of preference):

1. **Title tags** — Page title tags carry a lot of weight in search engine algorithms, so make sure your title includes the keywords you are targeting.

2. **Meta keyword description** — The meta keyword description tag offers you the opportunity to influence the Search Engine Results Page (SERP) description. If the phrase the searchers uses in a search appears in your meta keyword description tag, that description very likely will be used on the SERP. If your site ranks lower than your competitors' sites, but your description is much more attractive and "clickable", you might beat your competitors and get the click.

3. **H1 and H2 heading tags** — Not as important as title tags, H1 tag and H2 tag are still very good places to have your keywords.

4. **First paragraph of your page** — Body text is not as important as H1 and H2 tags, but you should have your keywords appear in the first paragraph of your page.

5. **Link text** — Link text is sometimes referred to as anchor text. Having your keywords in the link text is one of most important elements of search algorithm.

6. **Bold and Italics** — When writing your page, make sure the flow of text allows you the chance to apply bold and italics to your keyword phrases.

For web sites being localized for use in the global market, it is a good idea to have a glossary of pre-approved keyword terms and to ensure that translators do not sway from those terms. It is also important to help your translators understand why keyword terms should be placed on your site as mentioned above.

Once you have done your homework in selecting the right keywords and strategically placing them on your page, your "on page" work is done. Next, you need to examine the "off page" factors, which often play a bigger role in determining your search engine rankings.

Importance of Links

If your web site is your résumé, the links to your web site are your references. You can easily modify or manipulate the information on your résumé, but it is much harder to do the same to your references. Links are external votes of confidence cast on your site, and it says a great deal about your site's content and its quality. This is why search engines place such importance on links.

The quality, quantity, and relevance of links pointing to your site largely determine your rankings. So, if you are a savvy online marketer and want to achieve optimal visibility for your international language sites, attracting links to your site is vital.

Types of Links to Get

Simply put, strive for links from high-traffic, high-quality sites that are relevant to your industry. Get as many as you can.

Ensure site map includes links to the various country/region sites. (Hunt, 2004)

Think about the references example again. If you are looking for a job, what kind of references work the best? The endorsement of a personal friend, or of a well-respected authority from your professional field? Links from highly respected "authority" sites are harder to obtain, but much more valuable.

Here is another example. If you are looking for a good restaurant while visiting New York City, whose recommendation would you trust more: the hotdog vendor you ask on the street or a food critic from the *New York Times*?

When identifying the quality of links to your site, a good criterion to use is whether the link can send you a volume of quality traffic. Ideally, you want links from the following:

- **Sites with high traffic** — The link is less valuable if the sites linking to your site have very low traffic.
- **Sites that are highly relevant to your target audience** — For an e-commerce site for a digital camera, you want links from camera review sites, photography magazines, photo software sites, and so on. You get the idea.
- **Sites with fewer outbound links** — The more outbound links there are, the less effective they are for your site. Do not get lost in a list with hundreds of other links. Look for a page that has the fewest outbound links possible.

How Link Text Works

The words used as link text (sometimes referred to as "anchor text") play a critical role in search engine rankings. Some search experts call it "link reputation". There is a saying "you are who people say you are". In a way, your web site is what other sites say it is.

The power of link reputation is humourously illustrated in the following example. In Google, if you search for "miserable failure", George W. Bush's official biography page ranks first. Even though his page does not ever mention the phrase "miserable failure", there are enough web sites that use that phrase as link text to change the rankings. For a search engine like Google, which places high value on link reputation, Bush's site became what other sites call him — in this case "miserable failure".

FIGURE 8. Example of the Power of Link Text on Rankings

You can see why it is important to work your keyword phrases into the link text. The following example shows poorly written link text:

For more information on website translation, click here.

The next sentence is much better:

For more information, click website translation.

How To Get Links

Killer content means having high quality information on your web site that brings people back time and time again because they find what they need, when they need it.

If links are so important, what are the best ways of getting them?

- **Have killer content.** If the quality of your content is very high, people will link to it voluntarily, without you asking.
- **Provide a useful tool for free.** The link check tool on marketleap.com attracts a lot of links because the tool is useful and free. Think of something useful for your industry and give it away for free. This is a great way to attract links.
- **Submit to directories.** Directories provide valuable one-ways link to your site. Such one-way links are often considered more valuable than reciprocal links which are those that require you to link back. A link from a highly respected directory like Yahoo! carries quite a bit of weight when it comes to rankings.
- **Use your existing networks.** Do not forget that your suppliers, customers, and business partners are great sources for links.
- **Exchange links.** You may want to consider exchanging links with complementary web sites.
- **Buy links**. Some respected, high-traffic sites sell links at a cost. You may have to experiment to see which ones bring you a good return on your investment.

Training Your Translation Team

A solid search engine marketing strategy takes a great deal of human and financial resources to implement. The last thing you want is to see all that work undone in your international markets.

Search engines collect all of the words on each web page, taking note of where they are placed on the page. (Hunt, 2004)

Your translation team has the ability to take your state-of-the-art search marketing campaign back to the Dark Ages. Unless you educate your translation team about why it is important to be search engine friendly and how to achieve that goal, you may be in for an unpleasant surprise.

Some of the common problems that occur when an English site is translated into other languages include the following:

- Obscure albeit technically accurate keywords are used, which greatly reduces the chances of your web site being found.
- Keywords are missing from all the strategic places, such as title tags and meta description tag.
- Language tags and encodings are improperly used, and as a result text does not display properly.
- Meta tags and Alt tags are not always translated.
- Translators compose for flow and tone only, without taking search engines into consideration.

To avoid such pitfalls, we recommend that you do the following:

- Involve your translation vendor when planning keywords for your language sites.
- Develop a glossary that is strictly enforced throughout the translation process so that translators do not sway from researched, pre-approved search phrases.
- Provide an orientation session for the translation team on search engine friendly writing and strategic keyword placement.
- Conduct search engine quality assurance after translation is complete to check the completeness of translation, the proper encoding of the pages, and optimal placement of keywords.

Conclusion

Having killer content on your site and not optimizing the web site for searches, is like having an award-winning movie that no one ever sees. Just as movie producers promote their movie to ensure a successful run, so must you invest in optimizing your web site for searching. Just as a movie must be subtitled or dubbed for international markets, so multilingual web sites must provide ways for search engines in the target languages and countries/regions to access the site. Optimizing web sites for search engines requires research in all the markets you are trying to reach, as well as training for the web team and translation team to ensure that they understand how search marketing works.

The most effective search optimization effort uses terms that the customers use and builds links among other sites on the web. By implementing best practices in search optimization in English, and by carrying those best practices through all the language variants for your site, you can ensure that you reach all of your customers worldwide.

Glossary

The following is a list of terms are used throughout this article:

Encoding	The part of the code that tells the browser how to display the web page, and what character set to use.
Filters	A program that accepts data in one order or format and outputs it in another, according to the specified rules.
Header code	The code that appears at the very top of all HTML pages and provides the encoding information to the browser so that the page displays correctly. Also includes the keyword meta tags.
Index	A collection of keywords and phrases that the user can select from to find information.
Internationalization	The process of creating a flexible system architecture and processes for the product and documentation so that they can be easily customized to meet the needs of a specific locale. Generally focuses on the technical side of globalization.
IP address	The unique identifier for a computer or device on a TCP/IP network. The format of an IP address is a 32-bit numeric address written as four numbers separated by periods. Each number can be zero to 255.
Locale	The combination of geography, culture, and language that makes an area unique.
Localization	The process of preparing a product or service, and its supporting documentation, for use in specific target languages and cultures.
Meta tags	A tag that describes the contents of a web page.
Ranking	The process of identifying search results by relevance to the query. The highest ranked results are usually those the search engines deem most likely to provide the information you are searching for.
Search Engine	A program that finds a list of web pages that contain the keywords and other attributes specified in the query.
Search Engine Optimization	The process of modifying your web pages to improve their search engine ranking.
Spammer	A person who sends out unsolicited, unwanted bulk e-mails with the intent of selling something or of getting traffic to his/ her site.
Spider	A program that seeks out web pages for inclusion in a search engine. They are called spiders because they "crawl" the web.
URL	Uniform Resource Locator. The global address of the web site.

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