Why Localization Isn’t Just About Translation

While we at PhraseApp specialize in helping you to easily translate your software or web content for internationalization, it would be negligent of us not to talk about other aspects of the internationalization process and how localization isn’t just about translation.

Localization is about so many more things than simply
transposing your language into another, word for word.

When localizing software, apps or any aspect of your company, you have to keep in mind that everything about this new market or culture could be radically different from your own.

Failing to realize and appreciate this can cost you unnecessarily, yield underwhelming results or even give a negative impression of your company or product.

So what are some of the things that you need to keep in mind?

**Cultural Sensitivity**

This should really go without saying and may seem like a no brainer, but actually realizing, researching and maintaining that sensitivity when beginning a new international campaign can be a little bit trickier and more involved than you may at first think.

It’s important to remember that everyone views the world a bit differently from the way you do and your country and what may seem culturally insignificant could prove to be of
the utmost importance and sensitivity in another.

Even across the borders of nations that seem relatively similar culturally and historically speaking – such as the United States and Canada – will you encounter issues and subjects that may or may not be a little bit more taboo than others.

That’s not to say that you need to ignore sensitive topics entirely. In fact, if you play your cards right you could manipulate the grey areas of cultural references and humor to your marketing advantage.

But to that I say be extremely careful!

Don’t go rushing blindly into unknown territory with wild abandon.

Do some serious research into the minds and hearts of the people to whom you’re trying to appeal before you begin campaigning aggressively.

If you’re not 110% certain of what you’re doing it may be better to just avoid topics, images and other culturally significant references entirely. This can also be the most pragmatic approach when going after a general global audience, which I’ll get to shortly.

Cultural and historical references can be extremely funny
and successful as marketing tools if done properly, but the risks may be too great if extensive demographic research isn’t done before hand.

In most cases I’d recommend avoiding these risks entirely.

The Ramifications of Bad Branding

Branding controversy can become a significant detractor from your company’s name if your imagery, phrasing or other locale-specific marketing strategies conflict with people within your target market.

To shed a little bit of perspective on the subject; while not exclusively a topic in localization per se, recently there has been a hot debate in the US as to whether the Washington Redskins (American) football team should be renamed to something else due to cultural insensitivity towards native peoples.

For those who may not already know; “redskin” or “red man” has been used as a slur towards the native population of North America for centuries and in the modern era has taken on highly racist, disparaging connotations.

It’s doubtful that when the name was chosen those
responsible thought that the name would elicit this sort of controversy. More than likely they thought that it glorified their team, likening the players to native peoples as strong, proud warriors.

After all, it’s a football team – that’s not an unreasonable image to want, right?

While this in and of itself is not an instance of localization gone awry, the lesson is still valid.

This issue represents a change in public perception over the course of decades. It is still an example of serious branding problem that has led to an intense amount of racially charged backlash – a kind of backlash I’m sure your company can do without.

The times do matter though, and changes in public perception over a given topic – especially one that involves people and their histories – can change.

This is relevant because when you’re first approaching your new market it’s important that you shed your perception of the people you’re seeking to appeal to and approach it as an objective outsider without preconceived notions.

Avoiding branding fails such as this isn’t just a politically
correct process by which you make people not hate you, it’s also just good business. People react better to businesses that respect them as customers – not to mention human beings – and part of selling your product is making people like you.

Changing Times and Staying on Top of Your Game

To continue with our sports example – the goal of marketing a product or service is not only about making the changes required to localize your software or service, but keeping on top of those changes as time goes by.

I doubt very much that the people responsible for giving the Washington Redskins their name in the 1930s were trying to offend anyone.

They didn’t really put any tremendous amount of thought into the social ramifications of their branding, and it wasn’t until 1968 that native peoples started campaigning strongly against it.

In any case, your product needs to be adaptable.

Your marketing strategy needs to be aware of variations in
the social climate and it needs to be constructed in such a way as to be flexible and ready for change when public perceptions or opinions start to conflict with your current way of doing things.

One of the most amazing things about humanity is our adaptability to changing circumstances – a quality we seek to emulate in business practices and one that is especially vital in globalization.

Practices such as this couldn’t be more essential in emerging economies and markets that are beginning to blossom on the global scale.

**Idioms, Slang and Other Colloquialisms**

Continuing on with the subject of cultural sensitivity, be careful when choosing your words.

It’s true that translating idioms and other phraseological constructs across languages and cultures is not always successful and the prevailing wisdom says that these things may be best avoided entirely.

As a lovely little example, when the American car manufacturer Ford started marketing its Pinto model in Brazil they failed to realize prior to ensuing hilarity and ridicule that
“pinto” is also used as a slang term in Brazilian Portuguese for a small penis.

A message most likely in direct opposition to the message the car manufacturer was hoping to convey.

In this particular case, Ford managed to fail miserably at researching Brazilian slang.

It may be hilarious to the rest of us but I’m guessing Ford didn’t think so at the time and nor would you if this happened to your company because the intern forgot to cross-reference your branding with local phallic lingo.

Ford ended up renaming the car “Corcel.”

Mishaps such as this can easily happen if one doesn’t take the time to use an authentic human translator with personal experience living in the target culture, ideally even a native speaker.

But again, it’s not just about straight-up translation!

In order to properly convey your brand, your slogan, your message, you need to get inside the heads of your target market and really use their own culture as positive reinforcement for why they should invest in your product or service.
Typically the translation industry suggests avoiding such phraseological constructs because they can really make their job a living Hell.

Idioms don’t always have a simple or equally suitable foreign equivalent, or can use metaphors and imagery that just doesn’t suit a new market.

Be careful when using them – and if uncertain, it’s probably best to just avoid idioms and other similar phraseology entirely.

**Imagery**

Similarly, images, photos, logos and other icons can hold meanings that you may or may not have intended to convey.

Be extremely careful when choosing imagery that could have any sort of significance as a culturally sensitive or especially – something that could be misconstrued as a religious icon.

These things are not usually really all that hard to sort out prior to usage and only the most negligent of marketers should fall prey to issues that arise from the use of
insensitive imagery or icons, but it does happen.

Once again – it’s as easy as putting in a little bit of time and effort to study your market before starting your campaign.

**Script Direction and Style**

As someone involved with the localization of a product in a new market you *really* need to be aware of the differences between LTR and RTL scripts.

LTR is an acronym for “left to right” and is used by the Latin, Greek and Cyrillic alphabets most common in Romance, Slavic, Germanic languages and most – but not all – other Indo-European languages.

In case you hadn’t already guessed, RTL stands for right to left and is the style used by the scripts used for Arabic and other Semitic languages such as Hebrew. It is also used in a handful of Indo-Iranian languages including but not limited to Urdu and Farsi scripts.

It may seem simple enough to adjust to these differences but when localizing content from LTR to RTL you need to take *mirroring* into account.

Not only are you flipping the words around and pointing
them in another direction, you’re also going to need to adjust other elements of your software or webpage to complement these directional alterations.

When making these kinds of decisions try to visualize things from a mirrored point of view or consider using different elements entirely that still convey your message.

Furthermore there are also writing systems – particularly in East Asian countries – that are written vertically. These alterations will also require significant aesthetic changes to your software or website – possibly more than the differences caused by RTL and LTR orientations.

Writing systems such as these could likewise require you to make even more difficult changes to your content in order to make it fit and flow the way you like – and are worth bearing in mind before completing your project.

For more information on how to implement these systems check out this article: Structural markup and right-to-left text in HTML

**Pro tip:**

If you’re trying to set up your website to manage RTL scripts, try using a heat map such as one of these on your
current LTR page to see where people are clicking and viewing the most on your website.

Heat maps show where people are most likely to click, where they are most active, and some even show mouse movement data.

You can use a tool like this to see where the “hottest” sections of your website are – not only to learn how to best re-orient your content but also just in general as a metrics tool to help demonstrate – or even improve upon – your existing successes.

Addressing a Global Audience

If your product or service is available everywhere globally – such as a download – rather than just regionally it can change the playing field for your product or service on an even greater level.

Not only do you have to worry about one nation’s culturally sensitive imagery, language scripts and phraseology – now you’re talking to pretty much everyone – at the same time.

In cases such as this I’d highly suggest avoiding any cultural references, media references, potentially controversial
imagery or really anything else that could misconstrue the business goals of your company in an undesirable fashion. Just don’t even go there.

Keep things general and non-country-specific when choosing the words you employ and save yourself the risk of ruining your reputation on a potentially catastrophic level.

**Conclusion**

*Localization isn’t just about translation*

When you begin to localize your software for distribution in a new market you need to very strongly consider the culture, history, lifestyle and the phraseological nuances of the language – not just think about translating your software, app or site’s words as if you are a multilingual dictionary.

Study the people you want to sell to. Know what they do, how they react, how their language works in addition to making one meaning match another.

Globalizing content for an international market comes with its risks. The key to selling your product in a new country is to reach inside the minds and hearts of your buyers – hearts and minds that might be quite different from those you’re
used to – lock onto their neural receptors and reel them in without alienating, marginalizing or insulting anyone along the way.

Think you can do that?

Looking for more information on how you can localize your software, app or website? Download your copy of our free eBook *The Complete Guide to Growing Your Business with Localization* here and receive tips and best practices for preparing your content for a global audience.