



Member Perspective: The Perils of Using Automated Translation on Your Website

By Myriam Siftar

These days all kinds of companies are rolling out multilingual websites either to attract foreign customers or as part of a multicultural marketing campaign. For many small and mid-sized companies, though, the cost of translating a website—not to mention future maintenance of the site—is daunting. Depending on the size and functionality of the website, translation and localization easily can cost thousands, if not tens of thousands, of dollars.

Cost is one reason that many companies and organizations are turning to automated translation tools to convert their websites into various languages. It seems like a good idea: "It may not be perfect, but it's cheap and updates aren't a problem. What can I lose?" Well, the answer is that you could be losing a good deal—and without ever knowing it.

Here are just a few reasons why the automated translation of websites usually is not a good idea:

1. Funny, confusing or downright wrong translations:

Yes, automated translation has improved dramatically in the past few years, yet it often produces poor results, especially for text that is not very carefully and simply written or that involves technical or industry-specific terms. Off-the-shelf translation software, as opposed to free online services like Google Translate, can improve the results because it may allow for training the system on your specific subject domain or for loading specialized dictionaries. But there are costs—not only for the software, but also for training or hiring consultants.

Take, for example, the experience of the French financial newspaper *La Tribune*. Last year, the paper experimented with automated translations from French into English, German, Spanish and Italian using a purchased system that was supposed to improve with training. We monitored the English translation for several months and, although much of the translation was passable, we found numerous examples of incomprehensible translations, such as this headline: "[T]he salaried employees raise their threat to make jump the factory." In another article, English readers were told that Microsoft was going to "make a phone call" after a court decision went against the company. (In French, the text said that the company was going to appeal.) The foreign language options have since disappeared from *La Tribune's* site.

The likelihood of bad translation is multiplied when the translation is between two unrelated languages like English and Chinese (which is rapidly gaining on English as the most used language on the Web). Do you want your website reading like a badly translated Chinese menu?

2. The need for monitoring:

Because of the potential for mistranslation, if you use automated translation, you should have your website monitored regularly by someone who knows the target language well. Such reviews, plus the changes needed to fix problems, can mean major costs in both time and money. And the errors will remain on your site for the time it takes to discover and fix them, unless you maintain a

site for testing the translation of new copy before it is posted on the main site—which would mean more time and money, and usually is impractical.

3. The lack of “searchability”:

Automated translation may help people who have already found your site, but it won't help them get to it. The site still won't come up in foreign-language searches because none of the data actually is translated until the person comes to the site (unless you purchase special scripts that save the translations as pages on your server, which would mean more complications and expense). Metadata, especially keywords, used by search engines to index your site may not be translated at all.

4. Sluggishness:

Depending on the tool you use and the complexity of the page, the translation process can take some time. Your audience may simply give up and move on.

5. Unexpected problems:

It's possible that automated translation engines could make unexpected changes to the look of your site. Text expansion is a major cause. Translation from English into a Western European language, for example, usually increases the length of text by 15 to 20%, possibly ruining the look of your graphic design. Other changes are less common but possible. On one website that used Google Translate, we found that some elements that were hidden on the English site were visible on the translated site, while other elements, including some text links, disappeared.

Another thing to remember is that ***text in graphics won't be translated***. We found several sites that used graphics for important elements like navigation buttons. The result of automatically translating the rest of the page was particularly jarring.

Finally, when the free online automated translation is unavailable, it may seem as if there is something wrong with your site.

Other options

Luckily, there are options besides the extremes of translating an entire site or using automated translation. Consider translating only part of your site. Most websites contain a lot of information that is not vital to your average foreign prospect or customer. Translating your home page and pages describing your goods and services often is enough to reach out effectively to foreign-language prospects.

Another option is foreign-language landing pages: individual pages in different languages that have basic information about your organization and link to the main English site for more information. These pages are especially effective for the many people in the world for whom English is not a native language. Their degree of fluency varies dramatically. They often are more comfortable getting information in their own language but will engage with the English site if the landing page grabs their interest.

Translating part of your site or starting out with landing pages also makes it possible for foreign search engines to index your pages so that they can come up in foreign-language searches.

If you're considering adding automated translation to your website, take care: You may be hurting your image abroad rather than helping it.

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For more insights on targeting global and multicultural audiences, check out the Sept. 15 special issue of Marketing News on globalization and localization.