



# Going from Simple Translation to Successful Transactions on Global Websites

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It should be obvious, but many companies have yet to figure out that people don't buy what they can't understand. While enterprises large and small religiously devote marketing, sales, support, and product development funds to educating prospects and convincing them of their products' value, they under-invest in their websites for international markets.

Many still assume that potential buyers of their upscale product or service "probably speak English." Others assume that simple translation is enough, neglecting the deep infrastructure of currency support, country-specific business logic, and internationalized fields in forms for capturing data – all critical elements that online transactions require. These mistaken assumptions drive inadequate localization and spur endless, misguided debates about the opportunities, challenges, and the potential return on investment tied to website globalization.

## **End the Debate by Talking to the Buyers**

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We decided that the best way to end this debate was to ask consumers what matters most to them when they buy online. In July and August 2006 we conducted an eight-nation survey of over 2,400 consumers who answered questions in their national language about their behavior and preferences for website visits and purchases across a wide range of product types. The countries were Brazil, China, France, Germany, Japan, Russia, Spain, and Turkey.

Our survey focused on their preferences for buying in English or in their own language, having products supported in local language or English, and what events or factors caused them to abandon websites. Two key findings were:

- **Most people insist on buying in their own language.** Our data set only includes web visitors who purchased online, so results are representative of "buyers" rather than visitors in general. No one should be surprised to find that more than half our sample (52.4%) buys only at websites where the

information is presented in their language. More than 60 percent of consumers in France and Japan told us they buy only from such sites. When we factored in language competence, we found that people with no or low English skills were six times less likely to buy from Anglophone sites than their countrymen who claimed English proficiency.

- **The more important an item is to the buyer, the more impact language has on its purchase.** Among our respondents the vast majority (85.3%) feels that pre-purchase information in their own language is a critical factor in buying insurance and other financial services. Conversely, just 45.8 percent of the sample told us that language is important when buying a shirt. The more valuable an item, the more likely it is that someone will decide that reading about it in their own language is a non-negotiable pre-cursor to buying it.

Our eight-country survey uncovered a lot of new information about international buying habits, validated long-held assumptions, and disproved a few shibboleths.<sup>i</sup> Spanish, Brazilian, and Turkish consumers were most proficient in English, while Japanese, Russian, and Chinese were the least comfortable in using English.

Among the more interesting new data was the fact that more than half of the respondents sometimes use machine translation (MT) to read an English-language website – even if they are proficient in English. This proved our contention that machine translation is far better than the option of no translation at all. We also found that this usage of automated translation maps intriguingly to the relative quality of output (with Spain being an exception). French and German output is better than Turkish, Chinese, and Brazilian Portuguese. Japanese buyers are more accustomed to using MT output, having relied on it for many years.<sup>ii</sup>

## **Translation Is NOT Enough – Localization Makes the Difference**

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Marketing executives and web designers spend lots of time worrying about why, when, and where visitors leave their websites. To answer this question, we asked our respondents to rank eight reasons for leaving a website, categorizing them across six stages of an online interaction:

- **Enter.** Based on first impression upon arriving at a website, the visitor determines whether or not to stay and look around – or immediately exit.
- **Browse.** The visitor clicks around to see what is there or searches the site to find something specific. Lack of immediately identifiable content in the

visitor’s native language exponentially increases the likelihood of his early departure from the site.

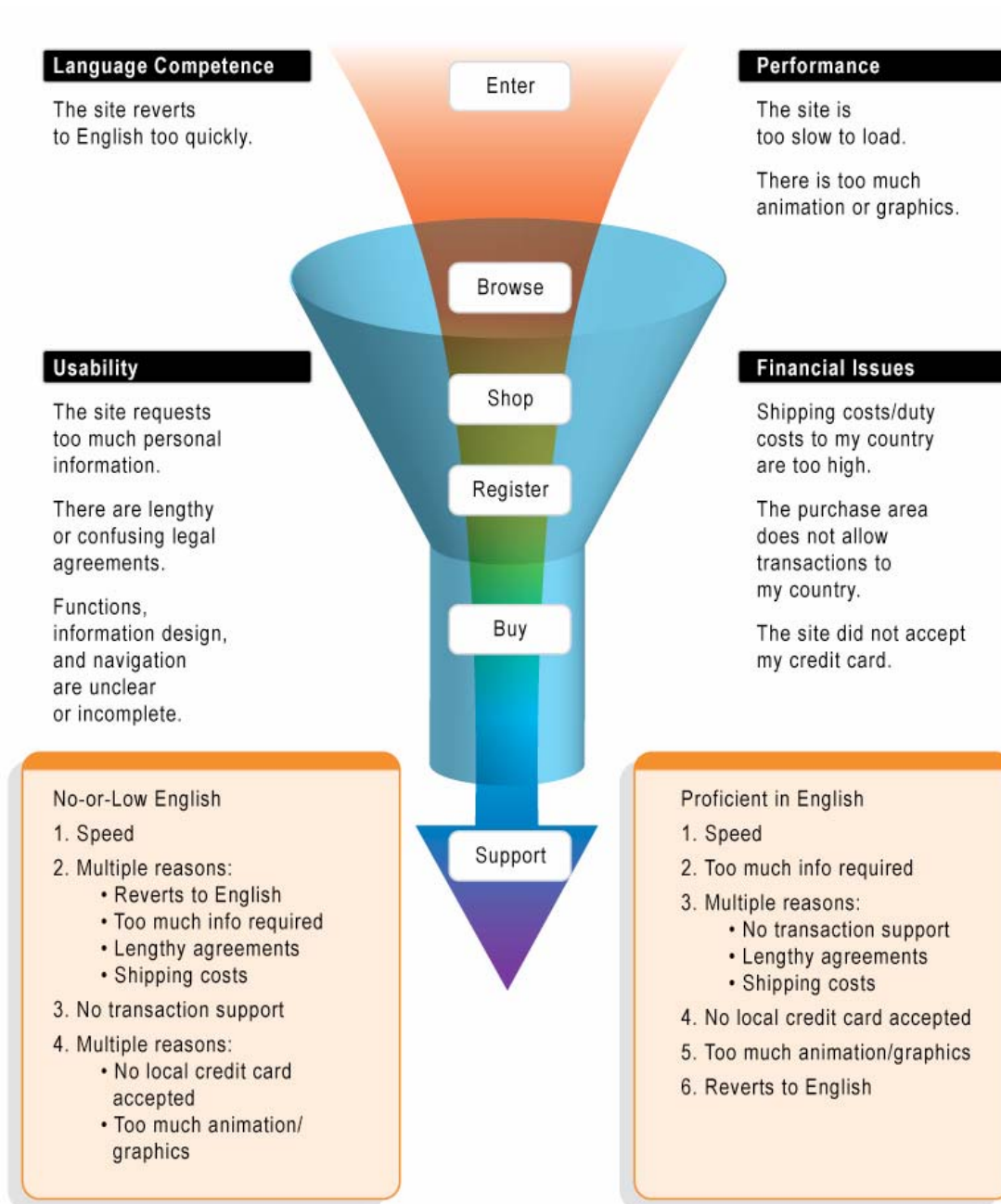


Figure 1: Why Foreign Consumers Abandon English-Language Websites  
Source: Common Sense Advisory, Inc.

- **Shop.** At this stage, visitors find an item they are interested in, and check pricing and availability. They may also check shipping and legal terms. Absent

clear indication of local currency pricing and shipping information, many would-be buyers bail out at this juncture.

- **Register.** This phase involves the visitor submitting personal information through web forms. It may happen with or without the shopping and buying steps. Forms that don't accept addresses in the format used in their country – that is, forms that have not been internationalized – will cause another layer of buyers to peel away and look elsewhere.
- **Buy.** The visitor enters payment and shipping info and completes a transaction. A committed buyer has jumped through all hoops. But the final sale is not the end of the relationship – sooner or later, there will be another interaction.
- **Support.** The visitor requires post-sales support by phone, e-mail, or web. As soon as a buyer of your product needs assistance, he will return to your site or call you. Inadequate language support at this critical moment determines whether or not that customer will ever buy from you again. Data from our survey showed that post-sales support in the local language is even more important than at the point of sale.

We categorized the reasons for abandonment during the buying experience as visitors transitioned from casual visitor to browser to shopper to buyer to customer:

- **The uncommitted bail out at any time.** Sites can make only one first impression. First-time visitors review the look and feel of the site, sense the performance as they browse, and decide whether or not to spend more time there. Some exit immediately, driven away by slow page loads, unclear navigation cues, or by the site's rapid reversion to English.
- **Driven by desire or need, searching and shopping begin.** Actively browsing the site, visitors search for something they want to buy. At this stage, they might find an item and check pricing, availability, shipping charges, and maybe even customs terms if they are savvy international shoppers. Some may find the cost too high and leave. Others may find that their English-language skills – adequate or "fairly good" up to this point – are not up to the task of reading lengthy, complex legal disclaimers.
- **Buying adds a "localization" concern to navigation and forms.** Visitors who decide to buy must provide personal details and payment information. They may find that data forms on the site haven't been adapted to their country, so they cannot enter phone or postal code data. Some of the logical structure or

functions of the English-language site are missing or not translated. They might discover after filling out a form that the site won't accept their credit cards or ship to their country. Once you pass that hurdle, you can begin building a lifetime relationship with your new customer. But only if you remember that the customer experience does not end with a delivered product – you need localized support to tie the knot.

## Understanding Buying Behaviors of International Consumers

So how does all this translate into buying behaviors? People peel off at different stages based on their language confidence. We did find some commonality among all visitors, regardless of their comfort level with English – the need for speed. “The site is slow to load” outscored all other choices for both groups.

- **Language and pre-commerce issues drive away low-or-no English visitors.** After sluggishness, the top reasons less proficient visitors leave a site include quick reversion to English, lengthy agreements to read, requirements to provide too much information, and the prospect of paying hefty shipping costs. Next up on their list of site turnoffs: the absence of transaction support for their country, followed by the inability of the site to accept local credit cards. Finally, too much animation and graphics diverted their attention from the transaction.
- **Commerce issues drive away English-proficient visitors.** The demand for too much information followed slow-to-load as the most cited reason for these people to leave a site, reflecting the universal challenge of registration and pre-purchase data collection forms. Next, the lack of transaction support for their country, lengthy agreements, and shipping costs sent them on their way. If they managed to get past all of those pre-purchase hurdles, the site's inability to accept credit cards from that country derailed their purchases. Finally, animation and graphics, along with a reversion to English, trailed their reasons for leaving a site.

## Website Globalization Poses Challenges to Companies

Real problems and tough choices hobble the plans of many companies globalizing their web presence – whether they're first-time localizers or firms revising multilingual sites. Many blanch at the idea of translating the massive quantities of content at their sites, but we have found that it's not the translation that gets in the way. Instead, the bigger challenge is organizational.

A global web presence demands coordinated and harmonized branding and messaging, consolidated database and content efforts, and matrixed IT, marketing, and operational organizations. For most companies, this happens in stages, usually after several failed attempts.<sup>iii</sup> Each failure increases the sense of urgency and competitive anxiety. What should you do to increase your chance of crossing the global chasm?

- **Be realistic.** Don't pull any punches. Website globalization is a classic good news, bad news story. The good news is successful localization will bring more visitors and good business. The bad news is that it costs a lot to get started – and the costs don't go away. The initial work revolves around deciding to go global, aligning the forces, deciding on your approach, internationalizing the infrastructure, and designing global templates, local business logic, and operational process. Longer term, you must budget for running, maintaining, supporting, and enhancing the localized content and functionality for each market you choose to enter. Be realistic about costs and returns as you build your business model for website globalization.
- **Put somebody in charge.** This job crosses many business units – and it won't likely go away any time soon.<sup>iv</sup> It takes time, budget, resources from marketing, IT, and operations, plus management oversight to make globalization work. Smart executives realize that their company's web presence is a key strategic asset for communication and commerce. Global by nature, the website presence must be owned by someone with the power to make things happen.

People buy from you today, from your competitors tomorrow. Whether they're buying iPods or I-beams, international customers begin their buying cycle online, where they can get answers to their frequently asked questions, product information, and transactions – all in their local languages. Prospects can review product offerings, safety advisories, technical data, and competitive descriptions.

Tailoring services to local languages and customs is a natural extension to personalized marketing, creating a personally and culturally relevant experience that will strengthen the customer relationship and improve customer satisfaction. After all, people won't buy what they can't understand. And they can't buy if you haven't enabled transactions supporting local buying practices and credit cards.

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<sup>i</sup> "Can't Read, Won't Buy: Why Language Matters for Global Websites," Common Sense Advisory, September 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> "Automated Translation Technology," Common Sense Advisory, November 2006.

<sup>iii</sup> "Localization Maturity Model," Common Sense Advisory, August 2006.

<sup>iv</sup> "Chief Globalization Officer," Common Sense Advisory, January 2007.