

INTERACTION

Is the World Wide Web Really Worldwide?

To date, a whopping 65 percent of worldwide domain name renewals and registrations are made in the U.S. alone.

Of the top six countries contributing to domain name registrations, four are English-speaking: Australia Canada, the U.K. and the U.S. The four combined have 75 percent of the active domain name entries. It is safe to assume that as much as 70 percent of the content on the Web is in English.

That probably does not strike you as out of whack. We take English for granted in the U.S., since we rarely get exposed to other languages. English is the leading languages used in business today. But before drawing any conclusions, consider the following:

English is the second most widely spoken language, after Mandarin. But less than 20 percent of the world's population understands it, let alone reads it.

As the Internet moves to platforms other than personal computers, such as TVs, the Internet reach will expand to include mainly non-English-speaking audiences. Also, for many years now, leading operating systems and computing platforms have been localized and provided in many foreign languages.

The European Union regards the diversity of language as a great cultural asset and an important repository of

heritage. The Union's council every year invests tremendous resources to maintain linguistic diversity and multilingualism. Initiatives such as the European Translator, or EuroTra; Impact; Info2000; Language Research and Engineering, or LRE; Multilingual Action Plan, or MLAP; and the Multilingual Information Society, or MLIS. They are formed and funded every year by both the European governments and international businesses to further the growth of their native languages.

France, taking an extreme measure, recently enacted a law known as the Toubon Law. It requires all businesses in France to support the French language with their products and marketing activities.

Japan, the second largest global economy, is very conservative when it comes to languages. English, although taught in high schools, is rarely used in daily activities. One visit to Japan will convince you that, unless you can communicate in Japanese, your potential there will be very limited.

International Net surfers represent nearly one-tenth of visitors to major company Web sites, and are becoming accustomed to localized Internet pages. Check out the home pages of Advanced Micro Devices Inc, IBM Corp., Intel Corp., Microsoft Corp., and Netscape Communications Corp.

Most Web browsers are multilingual and can accommodate international fonts. More than 90 percent of the Web browser market is dominated by Microsoft (www.microsoft.com) and Netscape (www.netscape.com). Both companies' products are sold in more than 10 languages.

Search and online companies are going international. America Online Inc., CompuServe Corp., Excite Inc., Infoseek Corp., Lycos Inc., and Yahoo! Inc. lead the pack.

Is there a trend to detect here? Absolutely. Most companies that have a global vision and are serious about marketing their products worldwide have realized that although English is the leading answer, it is not the only one. They either have localized their sites or will do so. They see a multilingual Web not as a threat, but rather as an opportunity.

The benefits easily outweigh the costs: a tangible competitive edge; an international image that is hard to ignore; concrete commitment to customers worldwide; communications with customers and prospects in their native tongues; and international market penetration.

If your company has a global vision, ask yourself these two simple questions: Do all of your target markets

understand English? Is your Web site multilingual?

If you answered "no" to both questions, you are not alone. You are just like the majority of the companies that have a presence on the Web. Being able to answer yes is being able to say you have a competitive edge—and that you really have a presence on the *World Wide Web*.

After all, the language of business is not English; it is the language of the customer.



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