

STRIKING THE RIGHT BALANCE:

STANDARDIZATION VS. CUSTOMIZATION

OF ON-SITE CONTENT FOR GLOBAL CUSTOMERS



03 INTRODUCTION

04 STANDARDIZATION & CUSTOMIZATION, DEMYSTIFIED

05 THE TRANSNATIONAL BALANCING ACT

07 CHOOSING THE RIGHT BALANCE

09 BEST PRACTICES FOR TRANSNATIONAL MARKETING

When it comes to giving global consumers a stellar online customer experience, savvy marketers must find the best way to reach customers in their preferred languages, without weakening their global marketing strategy or overall brand messaging.

In doing so, they must decide how much of their website **to keep standard across all markets**, and how much **to localize for specific markets**.

Choosing the right approach takes time and careful consideration. On the one hand, businesses that fail to appropriately differentiate content for different markets can drive away customers. On the other hand, it's economical and practical to maintain standardized global efforts where appropriate. It's a balancing act—and a tricky one at that.

Fortunately, there are ways to successfully walk this tightrope. Read on to gain a clear understanding of:

- ⊕ The difference between website **standardization** and **customization**
- ⊕ Why it matters
- ⊕ What website content to keep standard
- ⊕ What to customize for local markets
- ⊕ And how to do so without complicating marketing processes, adding in-house personnel, or overspending

Let's get started.

Historically, companies used **standardized products and the same brand messaging across all global markets** to streamline marketing efforts and benefit from economies of scale. This one-size-fits-all approach focuses on volume, cost management and efficiency. But there was a downside. The administrative costs of coordinating worldwide efforts were significant. Companies couldn't capitalize on local market trends, either.

To compensate, some companies switched to **decentralized operations with strongly localized, multinational approaches**. In these scenarios, local teams managed separate content libraries. They oversaw different marketing efforts, too. This approach helped businesses connect more strongly with local consumers, but it also had a downside: it wasn't scalable or efficient. These days, savvy companies have adopted **a more balanced, transnational strategy that mixes global and multinational practices**.

Here, decision-making and content management are globalized, while in-market teams have the freedom to adopt marketing strategies that fit their local customers' needs. This leverages both the economies of scale *and* flexibility to drive bottom-line growth. It's the balance between standardization and customization.

How you apply these two approaches to fit your business can drive great ROI—if you do it right.

STANDARDIZATION: CONSISTENCY ABOVE ALL

There are attractive reasons to standardize your branding and products across all global markets:

- ➔ It empowers companies to globalize while leveraging economies of scale.
- ➔ It eases efforts in content creation and management by ensuring the same content is delivered across all channels.
- ➔ Customers see the same images, videos product descriptions and more, no matter where they are—which creates product and brand unity across all markets.

Customers like being treated the same by your brand, no matter where they live.

CUSTOMIZATION: LOCAL NEEDS COME FIRST

Customizing products and brands for local markets (a practice also called *localization*) also has benefits:

- ➔ Marketing efforts more naturally incorporate the needs of customers in different markets.
- ➔ Customers receive a more authentic experience, which generates positive brand credibility, in-market. It boosts conversion rates, too.
- ➔ Buyers in different markets have different UX expectations. Using market-specific images, product descriptions, payment methods and more helps make them comfortable.

Customers appreciate brands that “get” their culture. Customization adds a personal touch.

A *transnational* approach—in which companies take the best of standardization and localization to optimize product selection, brand messaging and customer engagement—is a best practice for in-person global marketing. But it can, and should, be expanded to online marketing strategies, too.

Global customers expect a rich online experience with your brand, and they want it in their preferred languages. This makes it easy for them to understand and respond to what you offer.

The question isn't *if* you should serve them in their native languages. It's *how* to do it with the right mix of standardized and localized content so every customer enjoys a culturally relevant and resonant experience that doesn't overburden your resources ... or break your budget.

This is more complicated than it seems. You can run the risk of **over-standardizing** your content and offerings for global markets, which largely ignores local customers' needs. You can also **over-localize**, which can either come off as too "try hard" by local customers, or can't be sustained by your internal teams without generating significant effort and expense.

The secret is compromise. But these tradeoffs can be complex to navigate since customers often demand a balance of both approaches. Here are several examples.



1

REGIONAL CUSTOMERS ARE DIFFERENT—EVEN WHEN THE LANGUAGE IS THE SAME

The standardization/customization conundrum comes into play when a company serves several countries that share a common language—as seen in Latin America, or when companies want to reach the U.S., UK and Canada. Due to the shared languages, standardizing content for these markets may seem like a straightforward decision ... but you must consider the business and cultural nuances.

For example: Can one website, published in the common language, effectively serve all of those markets? Or does each market require its own website? Are there subtle, but crucial, linguistic differences between markets that can impact the customer experience? (The use of word *apartment*

in the U.S. versus the term *flat* in the UK is a great example of this, as is *pants* versus *trousers*.)

And what about region-specific languages? Or legal requirements? A Spanish-language website may be acceptable to customers in Madrid and Mexico City, but it would alienate Spaniards who speak Catalan or Basque. And in some Canadian regions, brand messaging must be available in French as well as English. It's the law.

2

FALLING TO STRIKE THE RIGHT BALANCE LEADS TO CUSTOMER CONFUSION & LOST BUSINESS

Don't let the pendulum swing too far in the direction of either standardization or customization.

Consider the case of a popular travel brand. It had only one marketing manager in its home market, yet the company attempted to maintain fully local websites for nearly 40 global markets. These over-localized efforts led to misaligned marketing messaging that weakened the brand's reputation—resulting in lost sales.

The company then overcompensated by switching to a near-total standardized approach. This made messaging much simpler as far as in-house content creation and management. But the lack of localized content meant the local websites performed poorly in search engines.



EXAMPLES OF STANDARDIZATION AND CUSTOMIZATION

Many approaches to standardized and customized online customer experiences have been successful in different industries, times and geographies.

On one side of the spectrum, some companies opt for the most standardized approach as possible. Coca-Cola is a perfect example of this approach, historically maintaining a universal product line as much as possible, with little to no localization.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are companies that highly customize their products, online content and marketing for different markets. They may offer totally different products under unique brand lines for different markets, create unique marketing campaigns and more to fit each local market. **Procter & Gamble** takes this approach.

Somewhere in the middle are businesses that choose a balance between the two. **McDonald's** is a well-known example of this hybrid approach. It offers a mostly global menu that can be found anywhere. But McDonald's also incorporates local products to cater to local tastes—such as vegetarian options in India, burbur ayam in Malaysia, and gazpacho in Spain.

Choosing the best hybrid standardization/customization approach takes a mix of hard data, well-planned strategy and understanding your global customers. **But how do you choose how much to shift toward one end of the spectrum or the other?** When it comes to offering online products, services and content, these questions can point you in the right direction:

1

HOW MANY WEBSITES DO YOU NEED?

Consider how many markets your company currently serves, as well as its expansion plans into new markets. Ask yourself:

- How much do these markets differ from one another? How much do they have in common?
- How large (or small) is each individual market? Small markets can often be serviced by your company's primary website.
- Do customers in global markets expect customized content—such as French Canadians, who require a French version of websites?
- Is there special localized content that warrants a separate website or portion of the website, such as localized shopping carts?

Keep in mind that markets may have more differences than you'd expect at first glance.

2

WHAT PRODUCTS & SERVICES ARE YOU OFFERING TO DIFFERENT MARKETS?

Companies that offer identical products in every market are less likely to need highly customized content. However:

- Even when there's a significant overlap in offerings, it often makes sense to differentiate content when markets have significant cultural differences. (Different McDonald's menu items are offered in different countries for this reason.) Your website should reflect those cultural differences, too.
- Some companies may offer different prices for the same goods in different countries, depending on local marketing strategies, governmental regulations and other factors.



3

WHAT CONTENT MARKETING STRATEGIES ARE YOU EMPLOYING IN LOCAL MARKETS?

Products and services aren't the only things that can differ from market to market. Consider the following:

- Ad campaigns, cultural references in marketing assets, and other content may also be unique to each market.
- The more you customize marketing content for each market, the more sense it makes to provide a similar level of customization on your website.
- Because content can come in many forms—blogs, social media, product descriptions, mobile apps, dynamic PDFs, audio/video and other channels—you must consider how much localization will be needed in each channel, too.

4

WHAT CULTURAL DIFFERENCES EXIST IN THE DIFFERENT MARKETS YOU SERVE?

When the cultures and languages of the markets you're serving are similar, you don't need to do much customization. However:

- Remember that many cultures may have pronounced differences. A higher level of customization to fit those markets can be useful.
- Base your content decisions on firm, recent data and in-depth cultural understanding. Otherwise, you risk making serious messaging mistakes that can hurt your brand.

5

WHAT LOCAL LEGAL REQUIREMENTS EXIST FOR YOUR OFFERINGS?

Legal requirements may be minor from global market to market, but will likely still require some customization. For instance:

- Copyright, trademarks and other legal notices may differ in format and information depending on the country you're in.
- Other legal requirements may be more in-depth. In Canada, for example, companies that serve customers in French-dominant regions are legally required to provide a full French translation for their marketing materials, websites and signage.
- Research how local laws may impact your marketing. There may even be requirements related to your industry.

All of these requirements may lead to a need for greater customization of your online content.

As you move forward in determining how to present your content in the different markets you serve, keep these best practices in mind:



COUNTRY-LEVEL DIFFERENTIATION

Country-level differentiation involves a high level of customization for your website. It's most appropriate when you're offering wholly different products, pricing or campaigns for each country. This is full-fledged customization.

This means that your content will be different from market to market, and that your company will likely have a unique marketing strategy for each site. For instance, you might have different campaigns or blog posts with completely different key takeaways, depending on the market.

In this scenario, you must be able—at least up to a point—to make customizations based on local needs, such as local festivities, holidays and more. You'll need a website localization solution that can simplify this complex process for you.

LANGUAGE-LEVEL DIFFERENTIATION

Language-level differentiation requires you to account for your customers' languages and understand if their dialects are different. If they are, then you might need differentiated content—though you won't need to create wholly different websites for each market.



Unlike full customization, this process requires subtle changes. For instance, in Spain, the verb for “refuse” is *negar*, but in Latin America, the preferred verb is *rehusar*. If your websites don't account for these localization needs, customers will notice and either feel confused or offended. More important, these linguistic changes should serve your SEO needs. You—or your website translation partner—must conduct market-specific keyword research that can be implemented to drive organic traffic. The site's “under the hood” text that resides in website metadata—which is content often neglected by traditional translation services—should also be localized to improve your site's search rankings.

Expertly localizing this hidden content doesn't just help search engines locate and display your localized website. It also works within the unique pixel and character limits of regional search engines, so that the localized site “plays by the local rules” to further improve its ranking.



LANGUAGE NUANCES

Beyond using linguistic localizations from country to country, you should also consider whether there are regional linguistic differences *within a country* worth customizing for.

Every language has unique wording or jargon that is based on regional dialects. These **language nuances** are more common in certain industries where specific products sold on-site might have different names, or their names might have different connotations, based on local lingo. In these scenarios, you shouldn't translate your content again and again for each dialect. Doing so takes more time, money, effort and expertise you probably have in-house.

Instead, find a solution that can dramatically lower cost by easily repurposing translated content from online markets you're already serving for your new same-language markets—and can accommodate the unique linguistic needs of each market.

Additional benefits often include rapid website launches (measured in days, not weeks or months), increased regional search rank and conversions, and reduced costs.

SEARCH ENGINE-FRIENDLY TAGGING

When you are offering a site in a different language, it is always helpful to have **search engine-friendly tagging**. This means translating metadata that tells regional engines what language—and what *version* of that language—the site is published in. (For instance, Castilian Spanish versus Latin American Spanish.)



It's also a best practice to implement a sitemap for your multilingual websites using *hreflang* tagging. This ensures that your localized website's URLs are organized and automatically associated with URLs from your origin website. This provides a signal to Google that a better user experience exists for customers who speak a certain language, live in a particular location, or both.

These are tedious tasks to do initially and on an ongoing basis, but solutions exist that can do it easily and automatically.



A ‘LANGUAGE REDIRECTION’ STRATEGY

User experience and website navigation are essential for giving international customers a rich, satisfying engagement with your brand. Employ a **language redirection strategy** that helps your visitors get to the proper country website—and proper on-site language—that they prefer.

Technologies exist that can seamlessly welcome first-time website visitors in the languages they are most likely to speak. They can also anticipate customers’ other preferences, including country of residence and currency. It remembers these preferences for return visits—and supports cookie law compliance, too. This can increase the traffic and conversion rates of your localized sites.

TAKE IT SLOW

Remember, a **gradual approach** can be very effective as you transition into the customizations that will best benefit your company.

Make the shift to a more balanced approach at a pace that works for you. Choose what needs to be done right now, and then gradually implement additional customizations so you can test out the markets, find the best fit for your company—and effectively manage resources and costs.



CONCLUSION

Keeping a balance between standardizing and customizing your online and offline marketing content is achievable. Smart brands consider their needs and their target markets carefully and thoroughly, to find what’s right for their specific situations.

But even smarter brands find ways to do this that minimizes the need to increase team size and budgets, and keeps things simple for themselves to implement changes.

It’s wise to use an experienced translation vendor that knows the ins and outs of helping companies strike the right balance for their online and offline marketing content in different markets. Look for a robust, simple to implement, turn-key technology solution. The best solutions make it easy to implement new content changes in every market you’re in.

ABOUT MOTIONPOINT

MotionPoint solves the operational complexity and cost of website localization. Unlike all other approaches, our technology and turn-key solution are built specifically for this purpose.

We translate, deploy, and operate multilingual websites, optimizing the customer experience across all channels.



MotionPoint Corporation

info@motionpoint.com

www.motionpoint.com