SEO for multi-language websites: How to speak your customers’ language

In my previous column, I took a look at the options, intricacies and best practices for international SEO. In this article, I want to build on those lessons and detail how to tackle multilingual websites.

As with international search engine optimization (SEO), there are many scenarios, and the right solution depends very much on the specific situation. Do you target one country where

users speak multiple languages? Do you target specific languages around the world? Do you want a specific language for a specific country? In many cases, the solution will be a combination of all of these.

Combining international and multilingual SEO can get complicated. Mistakes can cost time and money while slowing your progress towards your SEO objectives. But knowledge is power, and ensuring you understand the options is key to success.

Creating content in multiple languages

There are a few common scenarios when creating content in multiple languages. Determining which of these matches your situation is key to making the right decision when building your site and tackling your website SEO.

The three main scenarios we see when building multi-language websites are:

- Multiple languages serving the same country.
- Multiple languages serving no specific country.
- Multiple languages serving multiple countries.

Let’s look at each of these in a little more detail so you can understand what is the right choice for you.

Multiple languages serving the same country

Canada is a good example, since it is one country with two official languages, English and French.

Source: WorldAtlas

Here we could have a single website serving a single country with multiple languages. In this case, we would want to use a .ca country code Top-Level Domain (ccTLD) for Canada to automatically geo-locate the site and then have content in English and French to target French- and English-language queries.

Sometimes it is easier to consider what can go wrong here:

- Is the English language version for the United Kingdom (UK)?
- Is the English language version for the United States (US)?
- For Australia? Or all the above?
- Is the French version for France?

To ensure the search engine understands your site, geo-targeting and language targeting multilingual SEO tactics

should include:

- ccTLD for the country being served to benefit from default geo-targeting.
- Single website with language-specific content in subfolders English and French: /en/ & /fr/.
- Site hosted in the country that is being targeted.
- Hreflang tags specifying language and country.
- Links from relevant specific language websites.

With all of these steps followed, a search engine has all the pointers needed to know that this content is for English and French language speakers in Canada.

Multiple languages serving no specific country

Here we have a situation where we are targeting users based predominantly on their language.

We are not concerned if an English speaker is in the UK, the US or Australia or any other English language speaking location (small differences in spelling aside).

We don’t care if this is an Englishman in a country that speaks another language. As additional languages are added, they target speakers of that language around the world with no geographical bias.

Imagine a company that provides a software solution around the world. This business will want to have content in each language and have search engine users find the correct language version of the content.

So, an English speaking visitor in the UK, the US, Canada or Australia would all get the same content. A French speaker in France or Canada would also get the same French content.

Options here are a little more diverse. This is where considerations from the real-world and business operations become crucial in making the right decision (as discussed in more detail in my international SEO guide).

The tactic we recommend in this scenario is a single site with the following multi-language SEO tactics in place to support the desired ranking goals:

- A generic TLD such as a .com that can target multiple countries.
- Single website with language-specific content in subfolders (e.g., /en/, /fr/, /de/).
- Site hosted in primary market with an international content delivery network.
- Hreflang tags with language-only specified (not location).
- Links from relevant specific language websites.

As the world gets smaller and subscription-based software solutions become ever more popular, this kind of setup is a simple way to target multiple languages across the globe.

Multiple languages serving multiple countries

This is where things can get a little more complicated because we may have multiple versions of the same language with nearly duplicate content, so technical configuration needs to be 100 percent accurate.

We may have a site in English and French, and we may have an English language section for each of the UK, the US, Australia and Canada, along with a French page for France and Canada.

- www.example.com/ – US, English (default).
- www.example.com/gb/en/ – UK, English.
- www.example.com/au/en/ – Australia, English.

- www.example.com/ca/en/ – Canada, English.
- www.example.com/ca/fr/ – Canada, French.
- www.example.com/fr/fr/ – France, French.

This is fairly basic: two languages and five locations. We have seen this get a lot more complicated, and if it confuses you, then the odds of tripping up a search engine are amplified!

Get this wrong and your rankings go down the international SEO tube.

Tactics here for a single site include:

- A generic TLD such as a .com that can target multiple countries.
- Default location and language (US English in this example).
- Country-specific subfolders (gb/, au/, ca/, fr/).
- Language-specific subfolders below the country-specific subfolders (gb/en/, ca/fr/).
- Site hosted in primary market with an international content delivery network.
- Hreflang tags with language and location specified.
- Relevant links from location- and language-specific websites.

This is a straightforward way to achieve the targeting of multiple languages in multiple locations.

Summary

It’s important to note this is not the only way to go about building multi-language websites.

You could use a ccTLD for each country with subdirectories or subdomains or a combination of any of these approaches.

There are lots of ways to tackle this, so covering every

potential situation is just not possible in a single blog post.

What is key here is understanding how all these international SEO and multi-language SEO tactics fit together so you can choose the right approach for your business objectives.

In my next article, I will take a look at the hreflang tags and how this fits together with international SEO and multi-language SEO to build upon the foundation laid here and ensure we send a clear signal regarding who should see what page. Stay tuned!

Opinions expressed in this article are those of the guest author and not necessarily Search Engine Land. Staff authors are listed here.

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