

The real Africa is not English, French, nor Portuguese



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As more and more companies line up to enter Africa, the world's second most populous continent with a rising middle class of more than 300 million, companies with language localisation strategies will enjoy early-mover advantage.



Why local language is important

According to research from Common Sense Advisory, 72.4% of consumers are more likely to buy a product with information in their own language.

But English is spoken as a first language by less than 5% of the world's population, and by only 470 million to 1 billion as a second language. In South Africa, English is the official language that predominates, and yet it is spoken as a first language by only 9.6% of people - far fewer than isiZulu (22.7%), isiXhosa (16%) and Afrikaans (13.5%).

Further north, Africans have for decades had to be satisfied with being served in English, French and Portuguese. Colonial languages are seen as destructive of local languages, and even as tools of local elites to keep control over the masses.

Market opportunity beyond elites

The economic picture taking shape on the continent is one of growing affluence. In fact, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) says that between 2011 and 2015, African countries will account for seven of the top 10 fastest-growing economies.

Companies that want to share in this stupendous market opportunity must translate to penetrate the market beyond the elites.

Already, leading South African companies are immersing themselves in the real Africa - including Business Connection, Vodacom, MTN, Checkers and Nandos. These front-runners are learning hard-won language lessons, some of which can be summed up as follows.

Gear up for greater human effort

Translators in Europe and the Far East have it relatively easy. Terms like 'IP address' or 'software' have been thrashed out, codified and are available with the minimum of internet-based research.

Not so in Africa. A huge amount of grind is needed to unearth local language translations for many modern concepts. Many African languages have not even been committed to books. Translators in more mature markets are also more adept at working with translation technology.

In Africa, the level of required training and support is much higher.

The way to get around this is to partner with a language services provider that understands local conditions and has built up and trained an extensive network of translators, skilled in using modern translation technology.

Take care of quality

Community translation initiatives and projects such as those under the auspices of the African Network for Localisation (ANLoc) do fantastic work at heeding commercial and language preservation goals.

But ANLoc has also shown that quality control is very important with such ventures. To this end, the organisation is currently working with industry players to use commercially proven quality assurance processes for its own community translation initiatives.

Make sure your localisation partner has the skills to test and ensure the quality of translations to avoid missing the mark or, even worse, causing offence.

Develop for - and by - Africans

Localisation isn't only about adapting to the language and cultural sensitivity of a specific country, but also about the value of a local footprint to tap into unique local thinking.

Companies like Adobe have set up development centres in India - originally to cut back on production costs, but the rejuvenating influence of emerging market cannot be discounted.

Pay-as-you-go originated in a country with a very different world view from developed markets - South Africa. And M-PESA was developed by Kenyans, for Kenyans living and working abroad, as well as for other African diaspora.

Start small, but plan to scale

It's good to start small, but look to the future. 20 years ago, Toshiba started its multinational ambitions with translations in three languages. Today, with competitive pressure from HP and Dell, the company translates into 24.

Toshiba's language localisation solution is clever and simple - it uses a computer-aided translation solution that speeds up the translation-to-publishing process by cutting repetitive formatting out of the translation refinement process.

Typesetting (in XML/DITA) is done once in English, and used to automatically typeset all the translated languages. This cuts days out of each new translation effort, reducing costs significantly. In addition, the existing language databases assist in future updates of texts, greatly expediting future outcomes.

Localisation: It's not just manuals

A few rudimentary checks before you get started:

- When entering a new market, consider more than your literature - how will you deal with local-language support calls?
- Consider your customer segment - do you serve businesses or consumers? For the former, English may suffice.
- Plan long-term - for now, the bilingual person in your office may be enough, but for your next software release, translation automation by way of a database of phrases is the way to overcome this.
- Get clean - experience has taught us that fragmentation is bad when multiple translations are under way. Quality assurance of the master document will flow through to every subsequent translation in the same format. Before embarking on translations, clean up the English document first.
- Ensure compliance with local regulations that have an impact on the text - such as business approval, foreign exchange, electric Type Approval etc.

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