

Localising like a pro



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You're thinking of setting up shop in a foreign country. At this point, the question needs to be asked - have you thought about adapting your products and marketing for local consumption (aka localisation)?

If not, or if you think your product speaks for itself (and that everyone in the world understands English anyway), you may be wholly unprepared for the adventure of going global.

If, on the other hand, you're fully aware of the importance of localising products, support and marketing to succeed in new markets, read on - but know that you may still need help, as the localisation maturity model (LMM) shows.

Localisation maturity model

The LMM was created in 2006 by Common Sense Advisory, a US-based market research firm, in adaptation of the software industry's Capability Maturity Model. It remains a classic reference model of localisation best practices, as demonstrated by successful projects.

The LMM helps C-Level executives appraise and improve a company's ability to localise. Armed with LMM templates, they can greatly improve their chances of producing high-quality localisation outputs, within budget, at scale and on time - every time.

The model describes five positive stages of maturity, while recognising that different departments or key individuals may be at different stages of maturity within an organisation. We would add a sixth, negative stage, where companies or parts of it are so in denial about the need for localisation as to be in minus territory.

How do you rate?

Where does your company fall on the continuum?

- Reactive - ad hoc response to business demands for multicultural support; few defined processes; lots of individual heroics
- Repeatable - basic project management processes are in place; external translation resources and engineering resources are used
- Managed - documentation, standardisation, integration and centralisation of localisation projects
- Optimised - increasingly scientific approach (detailed process, quality, and efficiency metrics); use of localisation -

and language-centric tools

- Transparent - internalisation of localisation as a natural part of code and content life cycles, business planning, quality management, customer interaction and employee experience; continuous process improvement

Growing pains

Every step along the continuum is progress, but comes with costly lessons. A company in the reactive stage is building a C-level understanding of the problem, but may lose a contract or two first. This may not be the worst thing for its reputation in a new market. What if it had won? Where are the local-language product manuals and training materials? What about sales and support staff conversancy with the target language?

In the reactive stage, localisation is a series of hurdles rather than competitive opportunities. The ideal is to move on quickly from it to a repeatable posture. Unless localisation is part of a World Cup event, it is unlikely to be a one-off, and should be part of the ongoing corporate thought process - for example, manuals and websites will have to be updated constantly from now on.

But at the repeatable stage, things can still be pretty disorganised - somewhat decentralised, with elements of reactivity. At this stage, companies begin to realise a need for a managed approach, to impose some level of standardisation in development and design across the business, to streamline Web and software localisation.

A managed approach is however easy enough if you're managing four language projects, but not if the task is 40. At the optimised stage, processes and procedures take on increasing importance.

As localisation becomes an everyday reality for multinationals, the last stage, transparency, comes into play.

Where to now?

Now that you know the company as a whole is a 1.5, while some individuals are ahead of the curve at 3.5 and others in negative territory, where do you begin?

The answer is: not in any one place but everywhere at once. The model's language makes it clear that localisation is neither an engineering issue nor a question of marketing; it is the entire company's problem. Merely translating your website into German won't help if the sales team or customer service desk gets a call from a German customer and cannot answer it.

In other words, localisation is a strategic issue. Companies have to ask themselves why they want to go international, and accordingly, what practicalities will influence the form and extent of localisation they can best manage.

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