Managing Multilingual Sites with a CMS

Understand how content management software can simplify the creation and maintenance of multilingual sites.
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BACKGROUND

What is a Content Management System?

A Content Management System, or CMS, is a program designed to help develop and maintain shared information, primarily websites. A CMS typically uses an XML format separating content from design elements, thereby allowing numerous combinations with minimal work. CMS’s are designed to allow multiple users to edit and publish shared information in a variety of formats.

XML’s flexibility makes having a CMS a huge asset for businesses and organizations, particularly those which need to publish content in multiple formats. Any time there is a large amount of content to create, and a multi-location staff responsible for managing it, a CMS becomes a tool not just for updating a website, but for communication and collaboration between staff.

This is why a CMS is so important for companies with multilingual sites. Whether your company operates completely separate sites for different languages, or wants to offer multilingual options within one centralized site, a CMS removes the logistical barriers to global accessibility.

MULTILINGUAL – THE OLD WAY

Before CMS technology was available, maintaining multilingual websites had to be done manually. This generally meant creating and managing a separate site for each language. Rarely is content created and translated into each language by the same person, and keeping up to date content on two or more similar (but not identical) sites causes confusion, redundancy, and inconsistency.

Even when companies are using a basic CMS, maintaining multiple sites is still an issue. Most CMS products are designed to manage only one site. If your company publishes separate sites in separate languages, then separate CMS’s must also be used, and content cannot be shared across the different platforms.

For companies who prefer to have one central site with tight integration between the different languages, a typical CMS simply does not have the capability to handle the multiple data structures and complex configurations, and relationships that are needed.
A BETTER WAY

Some specialized CMS products, however, offer a better way to manage multiple or multilingual sites.

Managing Multiple Sites

There are two ways to approach a multilingual site. The first is to simply treat each language as a separate site. For example, if your company has locations in the United States, Germany, and Japan, your sites may be www.yoursite.com, www.yoursite.de, and www.yoursite.jp. Or, if your company is based in one country but needs separate sites to manage multiple languages, you may choose to do www.en.yoursite.com, and www.jp.yoursite.com and so on.

When you have two or more sites with the same content, you need tools that minimize duplicate work, and aid in keeping each site consistently up to date. That's where the CMS comes in.

Reusing Design Elements Across Sites

One important time saving feature of using a multi-site capable CMS is the ability to reuse elements across multiple sites. This means that for both your English and Japanese site, for example, you could use the same templates, CSS, index blocks, etc. With just a simple edit to the main template, changes are replicated on every page using that template, in both language sites.

Managing multiple sites in this way not only saves developer time, it ensures the consistency of your company’s online corporate image, regardless of language.

Notification of Changes

Using a multi-site CMS, individualized workflows can be created to ensure that all content stays consistently up to date. If a user makes changes to a page in one site, the users responsible for that same page version in the other language sites are automatically notified that their pages need to be updated. The CMS also offers the ability to compare documents, showing users clearly the updates that are need.
The diagram below explains how the granular format of a CMS makes it easy for users to manage multilingual sites by letting the more complex processes occur automatically:
Multi-Site Flexibility
Although one of the key draws for the use of a CMS for multi-site management, it is important to remember that flexibility is still an option. If certain content is relevant only to a specific language site, that content need not be linked to any other site, and may be maintained separately. It may still use the same templates, indices, and CSS, but does not require automatic generation of mirror pages. Using a CMS should never restrict a company’s options; rather it should be able to facilitate your company’s requirements and make achieving those requirements simpler and easier than ever before.

Multiple Languages in One Site
Some companies desire a more tightly integrated multilingual site, and prefer to offer only one website with multiple visitor-selected language outputs.

In such a case, users may switch between languages on any page on the website, rather than navigating separate sites to get to the same page in another language. This is a tedious and highly-technical project if undertaken by hand. However, with a CMS, even non-technical business users can still manage their own online content – in multiple languages – with ease.

Here’s how it works:

Multiple Outputs
Many CMS-driven sites take advantage of the CMS’s ability to easily generate multiple outputs. Common outputs for a single page include PDF, Printer Friendly, Text Only, Handheld, or XML. Multilingual sites operate the same way. Users can select English, German, Japanese, etc, getting the same page, just in a different language.

Each output has specific stylesheets and templates which select the elements that get displayed and how they are displayed. This is how the English output knows to only show the text entered into the English data fields, and the German output only shows the German text.
Structured Data Input
When a user edits a multilingual page, multiple languages are available. Here we see two languages, English and Japanese.

The administrator can determine which fields are available to individual users. For example, if the primary content editor is responsible for English, s/he needs access only to the English fields. The Japanese translator, however, can be granted access to view the English content but not change it. The CMS will only make the Japanese fields available to the translator in order to make translation and comparison easier.

Multi-Language Menus
A great advantage to using a CMS to manage any website is its ability to automatically generate menus, site maps, and other indices. For some CMS products, this is where multilingual websites really pose a challenge.
To generate menus, the CMS pulls information from the metadata fields for each page. In order for each language output to have menus in its own language, the CMS must allow additional metadata sets.

These additional sets allow users of each language to input the appropriate metadata. Individual stylesheets for each output ensure that the appropriate metadata is used to populate the menus for each language.

**Other Multilingual Features**

Having the right CMS doesn’t just make it possible to manage a multilingual site (or sites), it makes it easy.

**Support for International Character Sets**

It seems obvious, but nonetheless, if you want to develop and maintain a multilingual site, your CMS must offer support for international character sets. The best way is to use a CMS designed to handle all special characters and major international languages using the Unicode standard. This enables users to seamlessly switch from language to language without changing the encoding of any page. It also ensures that text will appear in the appropriate character sets regardless of the regional settings on a visitor’s browser.

**Multi-Language Spell Check**

Most business users rely on spell check to some degree, and most CMS’s offer at least an English spell check dictionary. If your users are managing text in multiple languages, having a single-language dictionary is not only ineffective, it’s a hindrance when it continually picks up foreign words as misspelled.

It’s important, therefore, to select a CMS that has multi-language spell check capability. You can select only the languages needed for your company.
The User Experience

The success of any CMS implementation depends on its usability for the non-technical users who will be managing the content. Whether your business intends to maintain similar but separate language sites, or tightly integrate multilingual outputs into the same site, the process of content creation and workflow approvals is largely the same:

Workflow processes like this can be customized to accommodate an unlimited number of content creators, translators, and reviewers. Depending on your company’s needs, the CMS can be set up to allow original content to be authored in multiple languages, or it can be restricted to allow only one, with all other languages being strictly translations of the original content.

The most important factor is for all content for each language to be put through the proper approvals in a user-friendly and streamlined way so that no inaccurate or conflicting content is published to the web.
CONCLUSION

As globalization increases at a steady pace, and localized content is more fully embraced, businesses and organizations stand to benefit greatly from offering multilingual websites. Whether your company is only just exploring the idea, or has been managing multilingual sites by hand for years, the right CMS can revolutionize the efficiency and quality of your sites.

Learn More

For information on how to get started, please read our free Content Management Buyer’s Guide with over 40 pages of helpful information, including:

- Questions to Answer When Buying a CMS
- Example CMS Sales Process
- CMS Functionality Checklist
- CMS Comparison Chart
- CMS ROI Calculator
- Anatomy of a CMS

The Buyer’s Guide from GlobalSCAPE is perfect to help you develop your content management strategy for multilingual content, portals, Internet, intranet, and extranet sites.