

Optimizing the Planet: SEO on a Global Scale

insight

William Flaiz | February 2008



As part of a SEO (define) team responsible for providing global services, I've helped meet the unique needs of clients in our Frankfurt, London, and Hong Kong offices.

We've had to recruit skilled, multilingual SEO experts -- no easy task. Global solutions require the right investment in infrastructure, but the benefits are reaped across both the domestic and international playing fields.

The fundamental gain is perspective. When looking beyond the U.S. Web, certain principles remain constant to search. Certain tactics are dependent on the engine, but some things never change. The landscape and players may be foreign, but traditional SEO translates well to the international scene.

Meeting the Locals

Let's face it. America is Google-centric, and with the search giant's 58 percent market share here, there's ample reason for that. Google greatly influences how and why we optimize, often setting the tone for the other search engines.

But what if Google isn't on top? Each region has its own dominant player, which means we must know the intricacies myriad foreign engines.

For example, Baidu has a 60 percent market share in China, followed by Google and Yahoo at 26 percent and 9 percent respectively. This changes some of our optimization strategies for our Hong Kong clients. What works in Google doesn't necessarily work in Baidu, and the rankings reflect that.

We need to understand what's important to Baidu outside the usual suspects of on-page content, titles, and meta tags. What's true for Baidu is true for all search marketing: know thine engine.

Speaking the Language

How do you optimize when you don't know the search language? As with learning a foreign tongue, there are some subtleties in technique for which there's simply no translation. This territory is where multilingual SEOs earn their keep.

Despite the communication nuances, there are still several guiding principles that hold true across engines and on foreign soil.

First and foremost, content is still king. If the site has plenty of unique, crawlable content, it is in good shape for SEO. The techniques for ensuring a Web site may be indexed carry over almost exactly across the regions in which we've worked. Code tends to be code no matter the language, and Flash and AJAX are not friendly to search engines of any region.

Ensuring content is chock full of appropriate keywords is another piece that remains relevant regardless of location. While "tennis shoe" may be the top American search term, "sneakers" could easily be a more suitable term in Germany for the same product. Doing market appropriate keyword research is vital to targeting the correct terms for each country.

Clients must also host their sites in the country of the top level domain, develop back links from properties within said domain, and use social media sites popular in their region. Remember: links speak the language, even if you don't.

Developing Diplomatic Relations

As a global agency, we're in a unique position. We have offices located within the regions of our worldwide clients and can tap into these resources when needed.

Most often we use our global contacts for keyword research and translation, in order to make certain we capture the nuances of dialect and remain in line with the overall client campaign. Having global partners not only breaks down language barriers, but also give us an edge on the ground. It's a real asset having someone a client can meet with face-to-face to review deliverables and help answer questions on short notice.

Avoiding International Incidents

As with any marketing discipline, advertising agencies need to be cognizant of language and culture when working outside of the U.S. We've all seen advertising campaigns where the message is lost in direct translation, and it's easy for a few misspoken words to result in confusion and anger.

With SEO, understanding the language is even more important, as the user interacts with the brand via keywords in a search engine. Having regional contacts and a deep understanding of both local engines and culture will help you avoid social pitfalls.

Although the U.S. still leads in overall Internet usage, other countries, most notably China, are catching up quickly. As we expand further into international markets, SEO will require the same level of commitment abroad as it does at home. Regardless of its regional differences, search marketing is on a clear path of convergence.

***This article was originally published in SearchEngineWatch.com, February 2008.*

About the Author



William Flaiz is vice president of search engine optimization (SEO) and web analytics at Avenue A | Razorfish. In this role, he oversees the firm's global SEO and web analytics practice that services clients across the US, Europe, and Asia. William manages a staff of more than 30 account services partners, analysts, and strategists, in defining the needs and providing solutions that help clients to measure and optimize their web site investments.

William joined the Philadelphia office of Avenue A | Razorfish in 2002 to establish the web development practice there and, within six months, he led the development of an award-winning healthcare portal for eMedicine. During this time, he managed the creative, user experience, and customer insights groups, growing the revenue and staff dedicated to web development projects, which accounts for approximately 1/3 of the office's revenues today. More recently, William served as vice president of operations for the Philadelphia office, overseeing all agency planning and financials.

William taught classes on web development and the Internet at various universities in Philadelphia, and has served as a judge for the eHealthcare Leadership Awards for the past three years. He has spoken at industry conferences and authored articles for industry publications, including MD Net Guide, the Center for Business Intelligence pharmaceutical series, and the Nashville Advertising Federation.

William earned a B.S. in accounting and finance and MS in information systems from Drexel University.

About Avenue A | Razorfish™

Avenue A | Razorfish™ is one of the largest interactive marketing and technology services agencies in the world. The company helps industry leaders such as Starwood Hotels, Kraft, Ford Motor Company and Carnival Cruise Lines use digital channels to acquire and service customers. Avenue A | Razorfish's full suite of digital offerings includes online advertising, Web site design and development, email and search engine marketing, emerging media strategies, and enterprise portal development. Its award-winning client teams have a great understanding of customer needs and provide solutions through distinct business disciplines, which include: analytics, strategy, technology, media, creative design and user experience. Avenue A | Razorfish has offices in markets across the United States, and global operations in Australia, China, France, Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom. Visit www.avenuea-razorfish.com <<http://www.avenuea-razorfish.com/>> for more information.

Avenue A | Razorfish
821 2nd Avenue, Suite 1800
Seattle, WA 98104
Phone: 206.816.8800
Fax: 206.816.8808

For more information please visit: avenuea-razorfish.com.