A Little Background

Who We Are

SEER Interactive is a digital advertising agency that specializes in search engine optimization, pay-per-click advertising, and analytics.

Founded in 2002 in Philadelphia, today SEER has over 60 professionals in offices located in Philadelphia, San Diego, and Madrid. SEER Interactive has a track record of growing leads and revenue for clients ranging from venture capital-backed startup-ups to Fortune 50 enterprises.
We Started an International Division in 2012

Why did we do it?

Straight from SEER Interactive’s founder, Wil Reynolds: “The catalyst for launching International SEO is twofold. First, we recently turned an existing client away for an international opportunity (we don’t believe in offering services where we don’t have DEEP expertise) because we didn’t have the right person... secondly, our clients needed us to. This year alone SEER consultants have helped clients in Brazil, Canada, Argentina, South Africa, England, Germany, France, and India. We wanted to have DEEP expertise to service them better and also an ability to work on their timeline. Our US-based clients both big and small have seen international expansion of their business as a KEY to their success.”
This is the first post in a series where we will review the different phases of launching an International SEO process.

These phases range from researching and establishing your International SEO strategy and goals, to measuring success and results over time.
1. Research & Establish
Your International SEO Strategy and Goals

During the first SEER International SEO Q & A on January 23rd, 2013, most of the questions we had about International SEO were about specific tactics or implementation doubts. These concerns are usually the result of an International SEO strategy that hasn’t been well-established at its outset.

Unfortunately, some of the most common issues with international websites occur because they are implemented and optimized without real planning and research – just by extrapolating the existing content and structure without taking into consideration that each of the languages or countries targeted have a specific audience, competition and industry behavior:

- The top products or services for other languages or countries won’t necessarily be the same as the ones of your main language or country version.
- The products or services in other languages or countries won’t necessarily be searched with the exact same “translated” phrases or terms.
- The sector or industry seasonality might be different in each country or language, with specific cultural or geographic-influenced festivities.
- The site’s competitors in different countries won’t necessarily be the same, and neither will their unique selling proposition or the offering that your site will need to compete with.
- The search volume and potential organic traffic in other languages or countries will be different.
- There may be local search engines in some countries that are more important that Google and you will need to optimize and rank for them to be where your audience is (for example, in Russia is Yandex and in China is Baidu).

Therefore, when you develop and start optimizing for other languages or countries you cannot simply extrapolate what you already have in your current site. Of course, this will be used as a guide, but you cannot anticipate the specific characteristics of each one of the countries and language audiences that you will target: You need to take them into consideration to establish an effective Web presence and SEO strategy.

“some of the most common issues with international websites occur because they are implemented and optimized without real planning and research...”
2. Identifying Your Online International Opportunities

The first step to determine or launch your international SEO strategy is to identify your online business opportunities based on:

2.1. Your Online Business Model and Operations

- How does your online business work?
- What’s your online business model?
- What’s your online business goal?
- Is it completely based on your site or do you provide local services or products?
- How do you deliver them? Do you have the capacity to provide them in any country and in any language?
- What are the existent restrictions and how high would the additional costs be?

Unfortunately, it is not always feasible or beneficial to deliver your products or provide your services in any country. Maybe you sell some type of food that you need complex permissions to obtain. Or, you can send your small products worldwide but there are important delivery costs and timings that you need to take into consideration.

Make sure to identify the implications of going international from the start, otherwise, you may end up wasting your time and resources since you will probably discover too late that your sales aren’t going to be high enough to compensate the international investment required.
2.2. Your Current Visitors’ Behavior and Demographics

Verify the language and countries of your current audience with your Web analytics systems. If you use Google Analytics, you can go to the “Audience - Demographics” reports to check the languages and locations of your current visitors.

Once you identify the most important languages and countries, you can start digging deeper to discover the behavior of these visitors:

- Which keywords did they use and which pages did they visit?
- Which services or products did they buy?
- How high is the conversion volume and their conversion rate in comparison to your main country or language?
Establishing Your International SEO Strategy:
How to Launch Your International Web Presence

2. Identifying Your Online International Opportunities

Apply and organic traffic segment and specifically identify this information for comparison.

“...Remember to check the general and organic traffic sources per language and country. Which are the most important search engines and sites, in general, referring you traffic per country and language?”
Finally, remember to check the general and organic traffic sources per language and country. Which are the most important search engines and sites, in general, that are referring you traffic per country and language?

Once you’ve internally analyzed your present traffic volume, behavior, and conversions from other countries and languages, you will have a much better vision about who you should take into consideration and further research for market potential.
2.3. Your International Industry Potential

The next step is to start the research for potential organic traffic volume, its behavior, keywords, and competitors in these international markets. If you don’t speak the language at this point, it’s important to have a local native support you with this activity. Don’t worry, it shouldn’t be that complicated if you use some of the practices outlined.

Always start by validating with services such as Alexa’s top sites per country and StatCounter which are the most popular search engines in those countries you’ve already identified as potential markets for your international expansion.

If Google is not the main local player keep in mind that you will need to research which are the most important ranking factors in these other search engines and develop your local search market research with them. Local search engines will offer an alternative to do keyword research. For example, there is Baidu Index in China and Yandex Keywords Stats in Russia and CIS countries.

“Always start by validating with services such as Alexa’s top sites per country and StatCounter which are the most popular search engines in those countries you’ve already identified as potential markets for your international expansion...”
Identifying Your Online International Opportunities

In the case of Google, you can start with its Keywords Tool by selecting the appropriate location and language and begin the research with the main keywords that you have already identified from those countries and languages in Google Analytics:

![Keywords Tool](image)

With these keywords suggestions, especially those for keywords with a high search volume, you can use a tool such as Ubersuggest that also supports other languages to identify more keywords opportunities.
Additionally, to obtain more information about each keyword per country, you can use SEMrush and Search Metrics Essentials:
Using these same tools, it’s also important to verify which sites are already ranking for these keywords since they would become your competitors. You should check how they’re structured, the type of content they’re featuring, their link profile, and social activity.
2. Identifying Your Online International Opportunities

With Google Trends, you can verify the seasonality and behavior over time for the most important keywords per country. This will help identify which are the top and rising related terms for each.

"Google also has a tool called Global Market Finder, which can help you identify international opportunities. But, use it with care… it may not always work as you would expect."

Google also has a tool called Global Market Finder, which can help you identify international opportunities. But, use it with care… it may not always work as you would expect.
2.4. Wrapping up Your International Analysis

By identifying potential new languages and country markets, initially with internal information and then by researching each market, you can validate quite a bit. You will be able to decipher if these countries and languages that you had initially identified will really provide a high search volume and positive trend, and you can also decide if they have reasonable competition that will make them attractive and potentially beneficial to target.
Establishing Your International SEO Strategy: How to Launch Your International Web Presence

3. Choosing the Right International Target

The next step is to identify how you would target your international audience while taking into consideration the information you’ve gathered in the research phase. Depending upon your online business characteristics and model, you’ll want to determine if it’s better to target the global audience who speaks a specific language (no matter where they are), or to specifically target a geographically-focused audience that speaks a language (or a set of specific languages):

3.1. Language Targeting

A language-targeted approach for your international presence is suitable when the location of the user is not a factor that influences the website goals, content, service, and product offerings.

This alternative will be suitable, for example, when you have identified in your analysis that you already attract visits that are highly distributed over many countries speaking the same language. The research you have done should also have verified the potential to attract new organic traffic and conversions which are equally distributed with similar terms not specifically focused on one country.

This means that if you approach this situation with a specific version for each country, you would end up with a high amount of sites that won’t compensate the effort. Having many specific site versions won’t have a big impact on the type of service product you provide for these audiences.

A site can also start with a language-targeted approach and evolve towards a country targeted one when it identifies that it has enough activity from one specific country. This includes characteristics that will compensate to create a specific site targeting them with a unique product, service, or content offering.

“A language-targeted approach for your international presence is suitable when the location of the user is not a factor that influences the website goals, content, service, and product offerings.”
3. Choosing the Right International Target

The website organization for a language-targeted approach can be sub-directories or sub-domains under the main generic top-level domain, as in the following graphic.

![Language Targeting Diagram](image)

Sub-Directories

- Yourbrand.com (Main Language)
  - English
  - Yourbrand.com/category-a/
  - Spanish
  - Yourbrand.com/es/category-a/

Sub-Domains

- Yourbrand.com (Main Language)
  - English
  - Es.yourbrand.com
  - Spanish
  - Es.yourbrand.com/category-a/
3. Choosing the Right International Target

For example, Scribd and Shutterstock are both language-targeted, but the first uses sub-domains and the second uses sub-directories.
3. Choosing the Right International Target

When you use a language-targeted approach, it is best not to feature a specific, national flag along with the language. Avoid using the image of a flag because you are actually targeting the entire audience who speak a language that may not necessarily be spoken in just one country. You may run the risk of upsetting some of your visitors whose country or nationality is not represented by that specific flag.
3.2. Country Targeting

A country-targeted approach for your international presence is the best alternative when location is a factor in an online business model, goals, and offering. You should have enough country-related search traffic potential to compensate the investment of building a site version targeting a specific country.

The website organization for a country-targeted approach can be comprised of CCTLDs (country code top-level domains), sub-directories or sub-domains depending on the main generic top-level domain, as it can be seen in the following graphic:

“...A country-targeted approach for your international presence is the best alternative when location is a factor in online business model, goals, and offering. You should have enough country-related search traffic potential to compensate the investment of building a site version targeting a specific country.”
Additionally, you may reach a point in a mature market where the audience in the specific country you’re targeting speaks many languages. You may realize that you are losing business opportunities with the audience based in specific regions where another local language is spoken.

In this situation, you may want to run additional research to identify the potential for this additional language, and if it compensates, create an additional language. You can create an additional language version with it inside the same country site structure that can be organized with any of the following alternatives:
3. Choosing the Right International Target

ccTLDs with Sub-Domains

- USA (Main Country)
  - yourbrand.com
  - yourbrand.com/category-a/
  - Switzerland in French: fr.ch.yourbrand.com
    - fr.ch.yourbrand.com/category-a/
  - Switzerland in German: de.ch.yourbrand.com
    - de.ch.yourbrand.com/category-a/

Only Sub-Domains

- USA (Main Country)
  - yourbrand.com
  - yourbrand.com/category-a/
  - Switzerland in French: ch.yourbrand.com
    - ch.yourbrand.com/fr/category-a/
  - Switzerland in German: ch.yourbrand.com/de/
    - ch.yourbrand.com/de/category-a/

Sub-Domains with Sub-Directories

- USA (Main Country)
  - yourbrand.com
  - yourbrand.com/category-a/
  - Switzerland in French: yourbrand.com/fr-ch/
    - yourbrand.com/fr-ch/category-a/
  - Switzerland in German: yourbrand.com/de-ch/
    - yourbrand.com/de-ch/category-a/

Only Sub-Directories
As an example, Amazon is country-targeted and uses CCTLDs. On the other hand, Microsoft is country-targeted, with many additional languages for some of the countries, and they also use sub-directories.
3. Choosing the Right International Target

The next post in the international series will focus more on the execution of the International SEO process, but since this is one of the most frequent questions about the topic, a preview is provided below.

In my experience, the best approach to refer users is to offer a friendly suggestion pointing them to the specific version that targets their language or country (as Amazon does) and avoid using an automatic redirect based on the IP or browser language that might be intrusive and complex to implement.

This should be done in case they end up using the wrong country version, however, if you correctly implement some geotargeting configuration (through Google Webmaster Tools and Hreflang), this won’t be a frequent problem.

“In my experience, the best approach to refer users is to offer a friendly suggestion pointing them to the specific version that targets their specific language or country (as Amazon does) and avoid using an automatic redirect based on the IP or browser language that might be intrusive and complex to implement.”
3.3. Wrapping Up International Targeting

All of the site organization alternatives – especially for the country targeted scenario, with CCTLDs, sub-directories, and sub-domains – have pros and cons as shown in the following table I developed some time ago for this International SEO structure post at State of Search:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>ccTLDs</th>
<th>SubDomains</th>
<th>SubDirectories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geolocalization</td>
<td>High.</td>
<td>Medium.</td>
<td>Low.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provides Geolocalization signal with ccTLD.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Possibility to have specific local IP for each country.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Possibility to geotarget with Google Webmaster Tools.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Doesn’t provide Geolocalization signal with subdomains.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Possibility to have specific local IP for each subdomain.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Possibility to geotarget with Google Webmaster Tools.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Doesn’t provide Geolocalization signal with subdirectories.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cannot have specific local IP for each subdirectory.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Possibility to geotarget with Google Webmaster Tools.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thanks to the geolocalized extension it doesn’t generate an additional level of complexity in the URL structure for each version</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adds an additional level of complexity with country subdomains for each version.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adds an additional level of complexity with country directories for each version.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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### 3. Choosing the Right International Target

<table>
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<td>Adds an additional level of complexity with country directories for each version</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Each domain could require specific technical support and hosting costs.</td>
<td>Each subdomain could require specific technical support and hosting costs.</td>
<td>Only one domain would need technical support and hosting services.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Branding</th>
<th>High.</th>
<th>Low.</th>
<th>Medium.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The localized version is easier to market</td>
<td>Subdomains can be confusing towards users and difficult to market.</td>
<td>Subdirectories are not as complex towards users as subdomains but not as friendly as ccTLDs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authority / Popularity Signals</th>
<th>Difficult.</th>
<th>Difficult.</th>
<th>Easy.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authority signals will be specific for each domain and each one should build their own.</td>
<td>Authority signals will be specific for each subdomain and each one should be build their own.</td>
<td>Authority signals will be consolidated on one domain and inherited by all country versions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Choosing the Right International Target

As you have seen with all of the previous options of international organization structures, you will always have pros and cons and you will need to identify which is the best alternative for your own present (or potentially) future situation. To make sure it’s a scalable configuration, look at additional factors such as your own characteristics, strengths, resources, and how you expect to grow in the future. Nonetheless, from my experience:

• For a language-targeted site, if you don’t have a high amount of technical resources to invest by managing different sub-domains, which will also end up needing more maintenance and independent popularity signals, sub-directories are the most straightforward structure at the beginning.

• For a country-targeted site, the ideal situation is to have a CCTLD since it offers more and better geo-localization signals, branding experience, and less URL organization complexity. Nonetheless, it’s suitable if you have enough resources to maintain the related costs and build authority signals for each country version, ideally also having a local country IP. This is usually the best for already well-established sites that are looking to expand their business internationally. If this is not the case, starting with a sub-directory structure that will at some point be migrated to its specific ccTLD would be the alternative.

“What you definitely want to avoid is having a “mixed” organization, which will be potentially more complex to manage and also confusing for users. For example, using sub-domains for both language and countries.”
What you definitely want to avoid is having a “mixed” organization, which will be potentially more complex to manage and also confusing for users. For example, using sub-domains for both language and countries.

This is why it’s so important to analyze and plan well from the start and assess a number of alternatives, and to also have a consistent organization that will work well, not only at the start, but also in the future.
4. Take Content and Technical Resources Into Consideration

The following step is to verify that you have the technical and content-related resources to implement the best site structure according to your situation (using the criteria mentioned before).

As you can see, your technical resources will be a very important factor to facilitate—or not—the launching of a new language or country version of your site: Does it allow you to set the previously described organization structures? Is it scalable?

More specifically, not only from a technical perspective but also from your content support capacity, you will need to verify that you can configure and optimize the pages of your language or country versions with the following aspects:

1. Unique titles and descriptions in the relevant language, effectively localized to the relevant geographic area.
2. Localized contact and support information.
3. Visible and crawlable currency and language switching options.
4. Navigational elements in the relevant language.
5. Localized headings in the relevant language.
6. Localized information of the page in the relevant language.
7. Reviews and comments in the relevant language, as can be seen in the image following.

“...Your technical resources will be a very important factor to facilitate—or not—the launching of a new language or country version of your site: Does it allow you to set the previously described organization structures? Is it scalable?”
4. Take Content and Technical Resources Into Consideration
Exclusive apartments situated in an exclusive location, only four blocks from Paseo de Gracia and 10 minutes from Plaza Catalunya where the Gothic Quarter and all its treasures begins.

This apartment operates with an automatic check-in system therefore payment must be by credit card (Visa or Mastercard).

The Apartment: This lovely apartment is one of several we can offer in the building. The photographs are a selection of the various units. The apartments may vary slightly in the layout or décor but the features are the same. Your specific apartment will be allocated on arrival.

A selection of 1 and 2 bedroom apartments in a completely renovated building (2011). Spacious and bright living/dining area with satellite TV and DVD, A/C and heating to ensure a comfortable stay throughout the year.

**Conditions of stay**

- **Refundable deposit**
  - €150 (to be refunded upon departure and return of the apartment in good condition)
- **Refundable deposit for Monthly booking**
  - €1,500 (to be refunded upon departure and return of the apartment in good condition)
- **Maximum capacity**
  - 6 People
- **Check-in / Checkout**
  - Checkin after 14h, Checkout before 12h
- **Optional extras**
  - Baby cot/crib on request, baby chair on request

**Special Offers**

- **Minimum stay**
  - 2 nights
- **VAT**
  - Included in all prices
- **Not allowed**: Pets, Parties

**Customer Feedback**

- **Average valuation**: 8.8 based on 3 users

- **8.0**
  - all the appliances and location
  - Sally, Canada, 02 February 2013

- **9.3**
  - location, design
  - Matthias, Germany, 04 December 2012

- **9.0**
  - Nice, Italy, 29 March 2012
This sounds simple, right? Sometimes it can be more complex than it seems because of the amount of content and pages. Always keep in mind that you will need to make sure to have not only the capacity to initially optimize, but also support the language on a day-to-day basis since you will need to:

- Verify the UGC
- Reply to your visitors questions
- Create assets and write a blog in a language that will attract links and visibility
- Manage your international community in that language
- Do outreach to identify and create relationships with potential collaborators in your industry, etc.

"Always keep in mind that you will need to make sure to have not only the capacity to initially optimize, but also support the language on a day-to-day basis..."

As you can see, even some big sites don’t follow these best practices.
Zara does not give the option to switch from one country to another (just the language, which is usually English and the local language) once you have selected it on the home page and enter to the specific site:
4. Take Content and Technical Resources Into Consideration

The Skype language menu is non-crawlable:
4. Take Content and Technical Resources Into Consideration

Tripadvisor URLs are not in the relevant site version language:

Sometimes, due to the initial platform, resource restrictions, or lack of a full international presence plan, very important sites have been unable to be completely optimized. This is why it is fundamental to consider all of the previous criteria during your International Web Planning phase.
5. Assessing and Planning
Your International Web Expansion

After having analyzed and identified your internal situation, external potential (besides content), business and technical-related aspects, as well as what you will need to have the best structure for your site, you will further be able to assess: will it be beneficial for your online business to expand with another language or country version?

If the numbers still don’t convince you, you can also test the market and keep costs as low as possible at the beginning by starting with your most important product or service(s) for the language or country market with the highest potential. Keep the new site version structure small and see if it has the traction and behavior you anticipated during your research and analysis phase before you launch a full site.

It’s fundamental that you set specific SEO “SMART” Goals (related to your online business goals, of course) for your new language or country versions. Although this analysis and assessment may take some time, by doing this, you will make sure that your International SEO process is well-structured and planned with realistic goals, and in the most suitable structure. If you put forth the time and effort, your new site will have many more opportunities to be successful.

“It’s fundamental that you set specific SEO “SMART” Goals (related to your online business goals, of course) for your new language or country versions.”
Let’s Chat About International SEO Opportunities for Your Brand

We can help you grow your search presence

Written by Aleyda Solis from the SEER Interactive International SEO Division. For more information, contact: jamieb@seerinteractive.com