

ARE WE ALL SPEAKING THE SAME LANGUAGES?

According to Dr Frank Burdett, of the University of Luton, many companies that rely purely on a website to trade internationally are failing to take linguistic and cultural differences sufficiently into account. “Too many businesses still assume that English is and will always be the international language’ he says. ‘But in just four years, the proportion of non-English-speaking Internet users has grown from ten per cent to nearly 50 per cent.

Dr Burdett believes that too many are failing to follow some simple rules. ‘First, when creating a foreign-language website, you should never rely exclusively on automatic translation programs. A native speaker of the language in question must edit the words for style and nuances of the language. Second, remember that the more pages an overseas customer or prospect needs to click through to find their language, the more likely they are to leave your site before you would wish. So address them in their language from page one.’”

Cultural as well as linguistic differences must also be considered. ‘In the West, the stork is widely used as an emblem of childbirth. In Singapore, it means your mother has died. How you present pictures of people is also important. If your site has an image of people looking you straight in the eye, Japanese surfers could take offence at what they might see as a mark of disrespect’.

The colours you select are also important. Dr Burdett says: Red works well in China, where it conveys good fortune. But it’s the colour of death in Turkey. If you’re targeting women you might be tempted to use pink. But outside the UK and the US, yellow would be a better choice. Or if you’re marketing organic food, don’t use green in tropical countries, where it represents disease. In Indonesia, in fact, it would mean your product is forbidden.