Website globalization for the United Arab Emirates

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The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is part of a traditional society full of symbols, rituals, values and contextual elements, as well as surprisingly unique patterns in consumer behavior. According to the UAE Ministry of Planning, the UAE is the most wired nation in the Arab world and also one of the top nations in online presence worldwide. In order to reach this potent market, a company's website should be reviewed for both cultural customization and correctness, as well as be localized into the target languages for the locale.

Seven emirates make up the UAE: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras Al Khaimah, Ajman, Umm Al Qaiwain and Fujairah. Each of the emirates is named after its principal city. The state law of the UAE is Islamic Law, also known as Shari'a. Islam is the official religion of the UAE, with the majority of the population being Sunni Muslim and approximately 20% of the population being Shi'a Muslim. Social life in the UAE is greatly influenced by tribal values, which are derived primarily from Islam and the family's heritage. They influence political, social and financial endeavors. Emirates often identify themselves by tribal origins and in smaller states primarily associate with those who share their tribal affiliation.

Currently, there are 29 free trade zones in the UAE, with another nine in development. The Jebel Ali Free Zone in Dubai is the most prominent. In these free trade zones, foreign companies are permitted to establish wholly-owned branches that

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are exempt from the requirement to appoint a national agent (sponsor).

Family ties, both nuclear and extended, are extremely important to UAE consumers. It is expected that people will share resources with their family. Although women play a central role in the family, especially when it comes to household items, it is considered unacceptable for them to live alone. The husband is the key decision-maker in the purchase of luxury items. It is considered important to carry items that give a person prestige, and these items can be designated by the consumer segments. These include western items and technology gadgets. UAE consumers seek out the best product price for the quality and required benefits, looking for high product quality and durability.

The Arabic language

Modern Arabic dialects are considered to be a part of the Arabo-Canaanite sub-branch of West Semitic languages. They have over 200 million native speakers. There are six major dialect groups of Arabic: Egyptian Arabic, Maghrebi Arabic, Levantine Arabic, Iraqi Arabic, East Arabian Arabic and Gulf Arabic, which is the primary language spoken in the UAE.

The Arabic alphabet derives from the Aramaic script, bearing a resemblance to Coptic, Cyrillic and Greek Script, and contains 28 letters. Moreover, letters change form depending on where they appear: beginning, middle, end of a sentence, or on their own.

Cultural customization: key issues

The basis for the cultural customization of websites is a theoretically sound, empirically validated framework. Research indicates that attitude towards websites, the sites' interactivity and usability, as well as purchase intentions of users, are enhanced when sites are congruent with the target customers' cultural predispositions.

It is important to avoid any cultural blunders and inadvertent use of offensive symbols in websites designed for any specific culture. Images of the entire hand should be used when depicting pointing, as pointing with just one finger is considered rude. The use of left hand is also considered rude. Shaking hands, eating and gesturing should be done with the right hand, though passing items with both is acceptable. It is considered bad luck to step across a doorway with the left foot first.

Images of people and animals are forbidden by Islamic law, and high offense is taken in the pictorial rendering of any religious figure, such as Allah or Mohammed. Therefore, calligraphic art is used as an alternative form of creative expression.

For the UAE, certain colors may carry specific meaning and symbolize aspects of their culture. Green indicates holiness or

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Arabic Language Facts and Tips

Diacritics: These marks, placed above or below letters, usually represent vowel sounds or other modifiers.

Numbers: Arabic numbers can be represented by either Hindi or Arabic numeric digits depending on the dialect of the target region.

Text expansion: When some languages such as English are translated into Arabic, the text can expand up to 25%-35%. This means the text takes up more physical space on the page, and the words inside the graphics, tool bars, tables and so on can all expand.

Bidirectional: Languages such as Arabic, Hebrew, Farsi are written primarily right-to-left (for strings) but often referred to as bidirectional text because numbers are typically written from left-to-right.

Tables: Avoid using too many nested fields and indents as these can reduce available space for text expansion after the translation. In addition, because Arabic is read right-to-left, the tables need to be reversed.

Letters: Arabic letters change shape depending on context. Moreover, each letter has up to four shapes: initial form, final form, medial form and isolated form. Letters that can be joined are always joined, often resulting in flowing calligraphic styles (right).

Source: www.omniglot.com, 2008
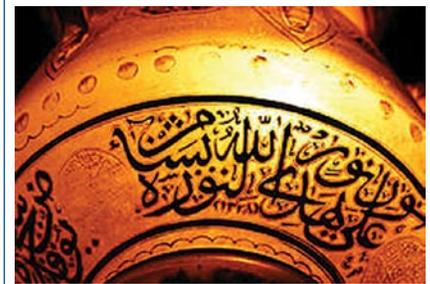
	Fast Facts	Numbers
General Stats	Purchasing power	$145.8 billion as of 2007
	Purchasing power growth rate	8.5% as of 2007
	Population	4.4 million
	Population growth	3.997% percent annually as of 2007
Internet	Internet population	1.709 million
	Future internet population estimates	2.089 million users by 2010
	Online spending	$37 million

Summary sheet for the UAE compiled from CIA World Factbook, Internet World Stats and eMarketer.

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luck; blue is a protective color and suggests immortality; yellow, strength, reliability, happiness and prosperity; and red, danger or evil. White indicates purity or mourning. Spatial orientation, which refers to how web content is structured, is also something to keep in mind. Spatial orientation has a direct effect on website usability because it affects visual perception. Manipulating the orientation can change the user's comfort level. What is user-friendly for one country may be vastly different for another. The Arabic language and the entire layout are read right-to-left. Thus, the placement of pictures and graphics should be carefully considered in order to

UAE Cultural Customization Examples

Although the UAE is a culture that shows a slight preference for masculinity, the blending of certain feminine values into a website is considered appropriate. There are numerous ways masculinity can be depicted, including achievement orientation, success, product durability, and a sense of adventure and fun. Femininity can be expressed by creating a website focused on softer themes with a softer-sell approach.

The UAE is a high-context culture. Incorporating elements such as harmony and aesthetics can help to customize a site for the UAE market.

The UAE scores high on the power distance, so cultural customization may be achieved by adding elements that emphasize honor and recognition, such as displaying awards that a company or brand has received.

The UAE is a risk-averse society. Therefore, it is important to reduce the consumer's perceived risk of shopping online. Using graphics or images of products and support personnel may help to reduce uncertainty and increase online shopping confidence.

Websites may be customized by emphasizing collectivist values. Research suggests features such as family themes can be included in a site to make it more appealing.

ensure the layout is culturally sensitive and aesthetically pleasing.

Internet and search engine marketing for UAE

The key to promoting a website internationally is to create localized content and key words, register local domain names and then promote it through local search engines, affiliate marketing, online and offline branding and promotions.

A search engine marketing campaign for the UAE should be multidimensional for both short-term and long-term success. Using Pay-Per-Click campaigns on targeted UAE websites and search engines is one way to produce immediate results and become familiar with the UAE consumer segment being targeted.

Long-term search engine marketing plans should include key words in both Arabic and English, as these are the primary business languages in the UAE. In addition, it is important to remember that many different expatriate subgroups in the UAE prefer to speak their national language. Research should be done on their preferred language in order to properly target the correct search engines and keywords.

The top level domain in the UAE is .ae. Other popular domains are .com, .org, .net, .info and .biz. At present there are approximately 6,000 websites being hosted in the UAE. **M**

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