



Can't Read, Won't Buy

*How Translation Affects
the Web Customer Experience
and E-Commerce Growth*

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Introduction

If you read English natively, you have enjoyed the best of the web since its creation. Content in this language has dominated the medium for nearly two decades while companies have catered to Anglophone markets and the enormous spending they generate. Even so, many corporations realize that billions of people don't read English at all or well enough to make buying decisions, so they're increasing information in other languages to reach many more prospects. However, the big question is: If they localize their websites, will more buyers come? How much will localization help them grow?

Common Sense Advisory's goal in undertaking this research and polling consumers in 10 countries in their languages was to test the hypothesis that companies can increase their sales by localizing their products and websites. Our survey found a substantial preference for the consumer's mother tongue. This partiality leads many potential prospects who are unsure of their reading skills to avoid English-language websites, spend less time during their visits, and not buy products that lack instructions or post-sales customer support in their language. In summary, we found that more local-language content throughout the customer experience leads to a greater likelihood of purchase.

This report contains six sections: 1) a description of the [survey demographics](#); 2) a discussion of the [attraction of English among our respondents](#); 3) a review of the [global customer experience](#) as it relates to language; 4) [alternatives to full localization](#); 5) [localization beyond language](#); and 6) [recommendations](#).

Lessons for Global Customer Experience Management

For companies that have already localized their sites, this study will allow them to benchmark what they've already done. For those working on it or yet to begin, this report provides real data that underscores the importance of language for enriching the global customer experience. When considered in the broader context of customer experience management (CXM), this study offers important guidance to companies supporting the customer life cycle for global markets. Language service providers (LSPs) and translation technology vendors will identify opportunities where they can help their clients.

The journey from discovery to awareness to browsing to engagement to purchase must be supported by appropriate content at each step. Having that

information available in the language of the visitor improves the customer experience by providing the right linguistic context for it.

Take note: This is not just a question of localizing English-language websites for non-Anglophone markets. The same concerns that consumers have about making decisions in a language that they don't understand or feel uncomfortable in apply equally to any other language that they don't speak. It doesn't matter which language it's in if visitors can't read it – they won't stay for very long and they're unlikely to buy what they don't understand.

Research and Methodology for This Study

Common Sense Advisory polled consumers in 10 countries in their languages and analyzed their preferences for content in their mother tongue or English. Our mission was to learn about the importance of language to website visitors. We probed the preferences of survey-takers for information in their own language versus English. We also gauged the likelihood of their purchasing goods and services on English-language sites. This primary research was characterized by:

- **A survey of 3,002 consumers in 10 countries.** Our random sample crossed four continents, with 300 consumers each from Brazil, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Russia, Spain, and Turkey. We chose these 10 non-Anglophone countries for one of three reasons: They have large populations, their economies are big, or they speak a language that's used in several countries.
- **Surveys translated into the official language of each country.** We conducted the poll in the majority or official language of each nation: Arabic (Egypt), Simplified Chinese (China), French (France), German (Germany), Indonesian (Indonesia), Japanese (Japan), Portuguese (Brazil), Russian (Russia), Spanish (Spain), and Turkish (Turkey).
- **A self-assessment of participants' competence in reading English.** Participants completed the surveys in their native languages, but we also asked them to characterize their ability to read English. This subjective assessment indicates their confidence in using English to evaluate products and make purchasing decisions. This is obviously not an objective test of whether they in fact comprehend English. Instead, it indicates their confidence in approaching content and transactions when presented in English rather than their local language.

- **Data collection and statistical analysis.** We worked with a market research specialist in global panels to invite participants to take our poll. This firm manages consumer and business panels around the world, certifying panelists for membership in their respective groups. Once the data collection was complete, our statistician reviewed the raw data and ran a series of calculations and correlations including frequency distribution, cross-tabulation, and odds ratios.

Related Research

Common Sense Advisory has been writing about the importance of translation and localization since 2002. Throughout this document, we referenced previous research that explained or expanded on issues being discussed. We recommend the following Common Sense Advisory research on related topics.

- [“Assessing the World’s Most Prominent Websites”](#) (Dec13) – This report presents the results of data collection from the 2,787 most prominent websites in 2013. Each chapter indicates how corporate translation buyers and LSPs can use these metrics for benchmarking and business case development.
- [“The 116 Most Economically Active Languages Online”](#) (Oct13) – This brief lists annual benchmark data on the size and economic opportunity available to marketers and other communicators in 116 online languages. It includes four sets of numbers for each: Total Online Population (TOP), Share of TOP, World Online Wallet (WOW), and Share of WOW.
- [“Adding Languages to Websites – It Gets Easier”](#) (Jan14) – This brief shows a correlation between how many languages companies already support on their websites and the number they might add in a given year.
- [“Can’t Read, Won’t Buy: Why Language Matters on Global Websites”](#) (Sep06) – This oft-cited research is the predecessor to the current report, based on a similar survey. It describes the results of an eight-nation survey of more than 2,400 consumers who answered questions about their behavior and preferences for website visits and purchases, in English and in their own language, across a wide range of product types.
- [“Localization Matters”](#) (Nov08) – Another frequently referenced report is the business-to-business companion to “Can’t Read, Won’t Buy.” We surveyed 351 purchasing managers in eight countries to determine the importance of language across eight discrete points in the business buyer life cycle.

About Common Sense Advisory

Common Sense Advisory, Inc. is an independent research firm committed to objective research and analysis of the business practices, services, and technology for translation, localization, and interpreting. With its research for both [Global Leaders](#) and [Industry Providers](#), Common Sense Advisory endeavors to improve the quality and practice of international business, and the efficiency of the online and offline operations that support it. To find out more about our research and how to become a member:

- E-mail us info@commonsenseadvisory.com.
- Visit www.commonsenseadvisory.com.
- Call +1.978.275.0500.

Future Research

Common Sense Advisory seeks interviewees from the community of people involved in building business applications for international use. If you would like to be interviewed or have clients who would like to share their experiences, please e-mail us at info@commonsenseadvisory.com. We anonymize participants and hold all information in the strictest confidence.

Applied Research and Advisory Services

This report and other Common Sense Advisory research into the best practices of business globalization serve as the foundation for our Applied Research and Advisory Services including International Customer Experience Assessments, Vendor Selection, Localization Business Process Audits, Globalization Excellence and Optimization Assessments, and Globalization Roadmaps. E-mail us at info@commonsenseadvisory.com for more information.

