

INTERNATIONAL SEO FOR ECOMMERCE

A GUIDE FOR PLANNING AND
TRANSITIONING TO INTERNATIONAL
TARGETING BEST PRACTICES

INTERNATIONAL SEO FOR ECOMMERCE: OVERVIEW

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Thinking of undertaking international expansion online? It's crucial that your website is correctly optimised for international search. You can only imagine the effects on your organic listings if your site is showing up in the wrong language for your target users. This guide will show you how to instruct search engines to display the right pages and content in your target countries, so that you get optimal international performance.

INTERNATIONAL TARGETING COMPLEXITY

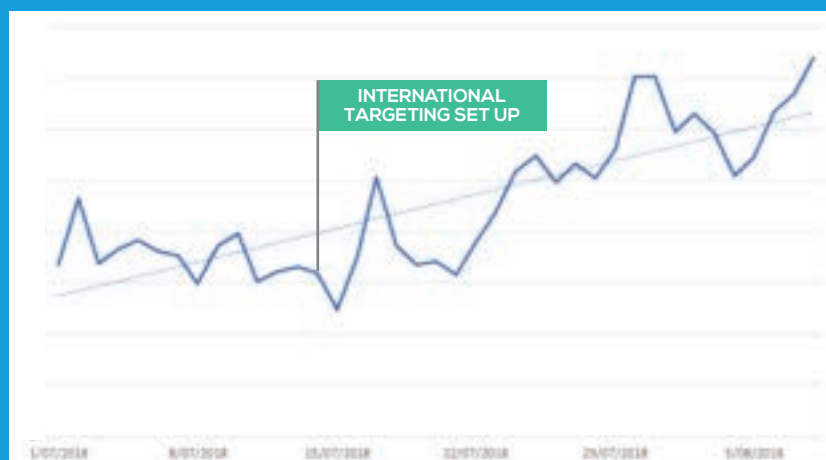
There is a lot of complexity on the SEO and web development side to ensure simplicity for the end user. These considerations include:

- Country targeting
- Language targeting
- Language localisation
- Content localisation
- Currency localisation
- URL and domain structure
- Shipping
- CMS limitations
- Analytics configurations

With all of these components, plus the likelihood that you're combining this with a migration, we want to give you the information you need to make the right choices and operate successfully at home and abroad.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Non-Australian traffic after international targeting set up



Impact on traffic 3 weeks after international targeting was configured on an eCommerce website.

KEY TERMINOLOGY

ccTLD

A country-specific top-level domain. These include domains ending in country codes like .com.au for Australia, .co.uk for the UK, and so on.

gTLD

A generic top-level domain. These are not country-specific and if used for country-specific content, they must be configured to target specific countries.

Subdomain

A major section of a domain, distinguished by a change to the characters before the root domain. A subdomain could look like **blog**.domain.com, but for international targeting it might look like **au**.domain.com.

Subdirectory

A section website as indicated after the forward slash in the url. Examples include www.domain.com/subfolder, or in terms of international targeting it might look like www.domain.com/en or www.domain.ca/fr.

Parameter

A modifier of a URL that either tracks a path of a user to the content or changes the content on the page based on the parameters in the URL. These are often used to indicate the language of a page. An example is www.domain.com/page1?lang=fr, with lang being the parameter.

Hreflang

A tag used by search engines to know where the different language and region versions of a web page exist.

INTERNATIONAL TARGETING OPTIONS



WHY IS INTERNATIONAL TARGETING IMPORTANT FOR YOUR BUSINESS?

International targeting is important for businesses that operate on a global scale. If you know that your website users are visiting your site from different countries to where your main business is located, and/or the users speak a different language, then international targeting is a key step in improving the experience of your site.

STARTING YOUR INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY

You will need to consider these three things when you begin putting your international targeting strategy together:

1. Specify your target country and region with an international-friendly URL structure (this is country targeting)
2. Establish the language your pages will target with the use of language tags (this is language targeting)
3. Create content in your target audience's language (these will help your site rank in each country)



COUNTRY TARGETING

WHAT IS COUNTRY TARGETING?

Country targeting is when you target a specific country with international SEO. Country targeting is also known as geo-targeting.

In order to do this you could do the following, plus more:

- Have a country-specific domain
- Specify the location you are targeting in Google Search Console
- Register your business address with Google My Business in the specific country (if applicable)
- Get links from country-specific websites (e.g. if you have a US site, ensure you have links from other US sites pointing to it)
- Use the local language(s) (more about this in the language targeting section)

WHEN TO USE COUNTRY TARGETING?

Country targeting is an appropriate strategy to use when:

1. The potential audience from a foreign country is large enough to merit the development and use of localised content
2. You have a physical presence in the geographic area you are targeting (either direct or through affiliates and partnerships)
3. You offer products and services in the local currency
4. Your local presence is necessary for the delivery of services and products
5. You already have or plan to offer a local service delivery office for local purchasing, etc.



COUNTRY TARGETING

SET UP

Country targeting can be set up using ccTLDs. A ccTLD is the country code top-level domain and shows users and search engines where the website is registered.

A ccTLD is bolded in the following examples:

- [http://www.yourwebsite.**fr**](http://www.yourwebsite.fr) (France)
- [http://www.yourwebsite.co.**uk**](http://www.yourwebsite.co.uk) (United Kingdom)

Country Code TLDs use ISO 3166-1 country codes, which are standards published by the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO). These codes define countries, dependent territories and areas of geographical interest.

Other things you can do to ensure country targeting is set up correctly include:

1. Prevent duplicate content and localising content

When creating localised versions of a website it is important that you do not create a duplicate version of the original site. This is because each country has different norms and expectations that can impact the performance of your brand. Best practice suggests that you create new content that is specifically tailored to the country or region you are targeting. For more information on localising your content, see the section content localisation.

2. Adjust pricing on the website to match the national currency of the targeted site

This is particularly important for ecommerce stores. The users in your targeted regions should not have to do currency conversions themselves. Displaying the right currency for them will provide a faster experience. See the section on currency localisation for more information.

3. Ask users before redirecting them

While it's all well and good to have all the information in the right page, it's important that you send the user to the page correctly. Google recommends that you ask users if they want to view the local version on the site. This can be easily done by adding a page that asks users to select which version of the site they would like to see, or adding a JavaScript validation that appears when the user first enters the site.

COUNTRY TARGETING

SET UP

WHY ARE ccTLDs IMPORTANT?

ccTLDs are important for international SEO as they are the strongest way to show search engines and users that the site content is specifically targeted to a certain country or region. ccTLDs do not target specific languages (for more information on language targeting see the section - language targeting).

When search engines crawl a site that uses ccTLD it assumes that all the content is specifically relevant to the geographic area that is being targeting by the ccTLD and should appear in the search engine results page in that region.

For example: If you have a website that has the following ccTLDs:

- yoursite.fr
- yoursite.us
- yoursite.com

All things being equal, then yoursite.fr is likely to rank better in a French user's search results than the yoursite.us or yoursite.com versions.

CONS OF USING ccTLDs

- If you own two sites that have different ccTLDs (for example: website.fr and website.co) then search engines will see these as two separate sites. This means that any link equity passed onto one ccTLD site stays there and will not carry across to both sites. Therefore you will need to build up the authority of each ccTLD separately. To get around this, HREFLANG tags should be implemented to share authority across all websites (See language targeting - HREFLANG tags).
- It can be costly to purchase and maintain all ccTLDs that are relevant to your business.

COUNTRY TARGETING

BEST PRACTICES

BEST PRACTICES

Your content needs to be tailored to your target country's unique consumers. You also need to find the most effective keywords for each individual market, instead of having to rely on keywords that are broadly effective across all versions of the site. A geographically localised site and its keywords will have a better shot against local competition, and this allows you to get more traffic in that region.

WHY YOU SHOULD USE COUNTRY TARGETING

- Country targeting can improve rankings because ccTLDs specify each country that you're targeting and makes your website appear more local
- Can allow you to target your audiences with the most relevant content and keywords to them
- There is less competition for local rankings
- Users tend to put more trust in localised websites.

WHY YOU SHOULD NOT USE COUNTRY TARGETING

- More expensive and time-consuming to set up and maintain

Using ccTLDs with HREFLANG tags and localised content is the ideal country targeting methodology.

LANGUAGE TARGETING

WHAT IS LANGUAGE TARGETING?

Language targeting allows you to target specific languages throughout the world. You can have an Australian site that has the top-level domain.com.au, but targets French speakers through language targeting. This method is particularly great for businesses who want to appeal to users with certain language preferences following that they want to target.



LANGUAGE TARGETING

SET UP

To set up language targeting you need to implement hreflang tags. These tags are pieces of code that tell Google what language you are using on your page and where other versions of this page exist for other languages. This helps it to show the right version of the page to the right person depending on their preferred language. You can think of them as language tags.

This example shows how the hreflang tag is used to tell search engines that the alternative version of the website content is available in French for people in France at the link.



Example:

```
<link rel="alternate"
href="http://example.com/fr"
hreflang="fr-fr"/>
```

In the case that you are targeting a different language to the primary language of the country, it is recommended that you use subfolders or subdomains for your URL structure.



LANGUAGE TARGETING

HREFLANG TAGS



WHAT DO HREFLANG TAGS LOOK LIKE?

The hreflang tag on each page should include a reference to itself as well as to all the pages that serve as alternatives for other languages and regions.

For example: You have an Australian website (website.com.au) that sells shoes to customers in Australia and New Zealand only. In this case, the hreflang tags for your homepage (on the Australian site) might look like this:

```
<link rel="alternate" href="http://website.com.au/" hreflang="en-au"/>  
<link rel="alternate" href="http://website.com.au/nz" hreflang="en-nz"/>
```

The New Zealand version of your site should also include the same annotations.



Customers outside of Australia or New Zealand may still see your site (hreflang tags are a signal, not a directive). However, if you localise other aspects of your content, the correct version is more likely to be displayed. For example, another form of content you can localise is your currency. Read more about this in the section "*Currency Localisation*."

LANGUAGE TARGETING

HREFLANG TAGS

TARGETING MULTIPLE COUNTRIES SPEAKING THE SAME LANGUAGE

You can use multiple hreflang tags on one page if you want to show that page to users in more than one country or area.

For example, if you have a website in Spanish and want to target users who speak Spanish throughout the world, you could use multiple hreflang tags on your site as follows:

```
<link  
rel="alternate"  
href="http://yourwe  
bsite.com/"  
hreflang="es-us"/>
```

This version of the website will target Spanish speakers in the US.



```
<link  
rel="alternate"  
href="http://yourwe  
bsite.com/"  
hreflang="es-es"/>
```

This version of the website will target Spanish speakers in Spain.



```
<link  
rel="alternate"  
href="http://yourwe  
bsite.com/"  
hreflang="es-ar"/>
```

This version of the website will target Spanish speakers in Argentina.



```
<link  
rel="alternate"  
href="http://yourwe  
bsite.com/"  
hreflang="es-cl"/>
```

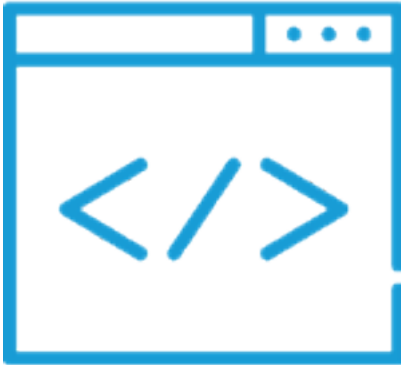
This version of the website will target Spanish speakers in Chile.



HREFLANG TAGS

IMPLEMENTATION

The hreflang tag should be placed in the on-page markup, HTTP header or the sitemap. It is important that it is only placed in one of these locations. It is wisest to choose the method that is easiest for you to update and maintain.



ADDING TO THE SITEMAP

Adding the hreflang tags to the sitemap is a convenient option as it allows you to keep the tagging off the pages, reducing the load speed of scripts on your site, ultimately reducing the load speed of your site.

Example:

```
<?xml versions="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>
<urlset xmlns="https://www.sitemaps.org/schemas/sitemap/0,9"
xmlns:xhtml="https://www.w3.org/1999/xhtml">
<url>
<loc>https://www.example.com/en/</loc>
<xhtml:link
      rel="alternate"
      hreflang="es"
      href="https://www.example.com/es/" />
```



ADDING TO THE HTTP HEADER

If you want to publish non-HTML files, this is the best option for you. You can add the hreflang tags to the HTTP header as follows:

Link: <https://www.yoursite.com/fr/>; rel="alternate"; hreflang="fr"

If you have a number of language translations, you can separate them with a comma. See example above.



ADDING TO THE ON-PAGE MARKUP

Add the hreflang tags as a link attribute in the header <head> section of your pages.

Link: <https://www.yoursite.com/fr/>; rel="alternate"; hreflang="fr", <https://www.yoursite.com/de/>; rel="alternate"; hreflang="de"

HREFLANG TAGS

IMPLEMENTATION

HOW TO TARGET EVERYONE?

If your page offers information in a variety of languages or asks users to select a specific page based on their location, you can use the x-default tag to show that the page is not specifically targeted. This looks like:

```
<link rel="alternate" href="http://example.com/"  
hreflang="x-default" />
```



HOW TO CHECK YOU HAVE IMPLEMENTED YOUR HREFLANG TAGS CORRECTLY

Tool: hreflang tag generator

This tool helps you generate link elements. If you aren't using link elements, this tool can be helpful to create some example code.

Tool: hreflang XML sitemap generator

This tool creates an XML sitemap from a CSV file with URLs for each language. The CSV file must have a column for each language, and if you want to add an x-default URL, simply create a column called x-default.

Tool: hreflang tag validator

This tool lets you check the hreflang tags you have created in order to ensure they are valid. This tool only works if you are looking to implement your hreflang tags into the <head> section of your page.



HREFLANG TAGS AND SEO RANKINGS

While Google says that hreflang tags do not directly help increase traffic, their goal is to help search engines present the correct version of the page to a user in the search results based on the user's location and their language preferences. We have found this to have a major effect on international rankings. This also has flow on effects to other SEO ranking factors like bounce rate.



LANGUAGE TARGETING

BEST PRACTICES

Implementing language targeting is tricky and crucial. Using the wrong approach can cause major issues and missed opportunities. Here are some best practices that we recommend when implementing language targeting:

1

Make sure everything on your site is available in the primary language of the region you are targeting (this is often easily overlooked).



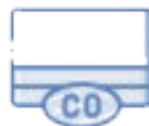
2

Do not automatically redirect a user to a different language based on the location.



3

Do not use cookies or scripts to show different language versions of the page. We do not recommend this approach as search engines can't crawl that type of dynamic content.



HYBRID TARGETING

WHAT IS HYBRID TARGETING?

Hybrid targeting is used for countries with multiple languages. There are many approaches, however the best practice is:

1. Target users based on country
2. Use the appropriate language reference with hreflang tags

If you are using multiple languages and countries, it is recommended that you use subdirectories. This is a simple way to format your URLs with the country code first and the language after.

For example:

```
http://example.com/us/en/  
/
```

Hybrid targeting is essential for international companies because there can be many countries that require multiple versions of the site for their language / region.

This chart from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm> indicates how many different languages can be recognised in different countries and highlights the importance of hybrid targeting.

Note:

Recognised Languages = RLs



HYBRID TARGETING

BEST PRACTICES

Setting up the correct URL structure for hybrid targeting is essential. Hybrid targeting creates multiple language versions of the same content. Therefore, it is imperative that the technical configuration is accurate to avoid penalisations for duplicate content.

Here are some suggestions for how to implement hybrid targeting.

E.g

General structure [country (canada) /language (french)]

- **Subfolders structure**

domain.com/ca-fr

- **Subfolder/subfolder structure**

domain.com/ca/fr

- **Subfolder/parameter structure**

domain.com/ca/page.html?lang=fr

- **ccTLD/subfolder structure**

domain.ca/fr

- **ccTLD/parameter structure**

domain.ca/page.html?lang=fr

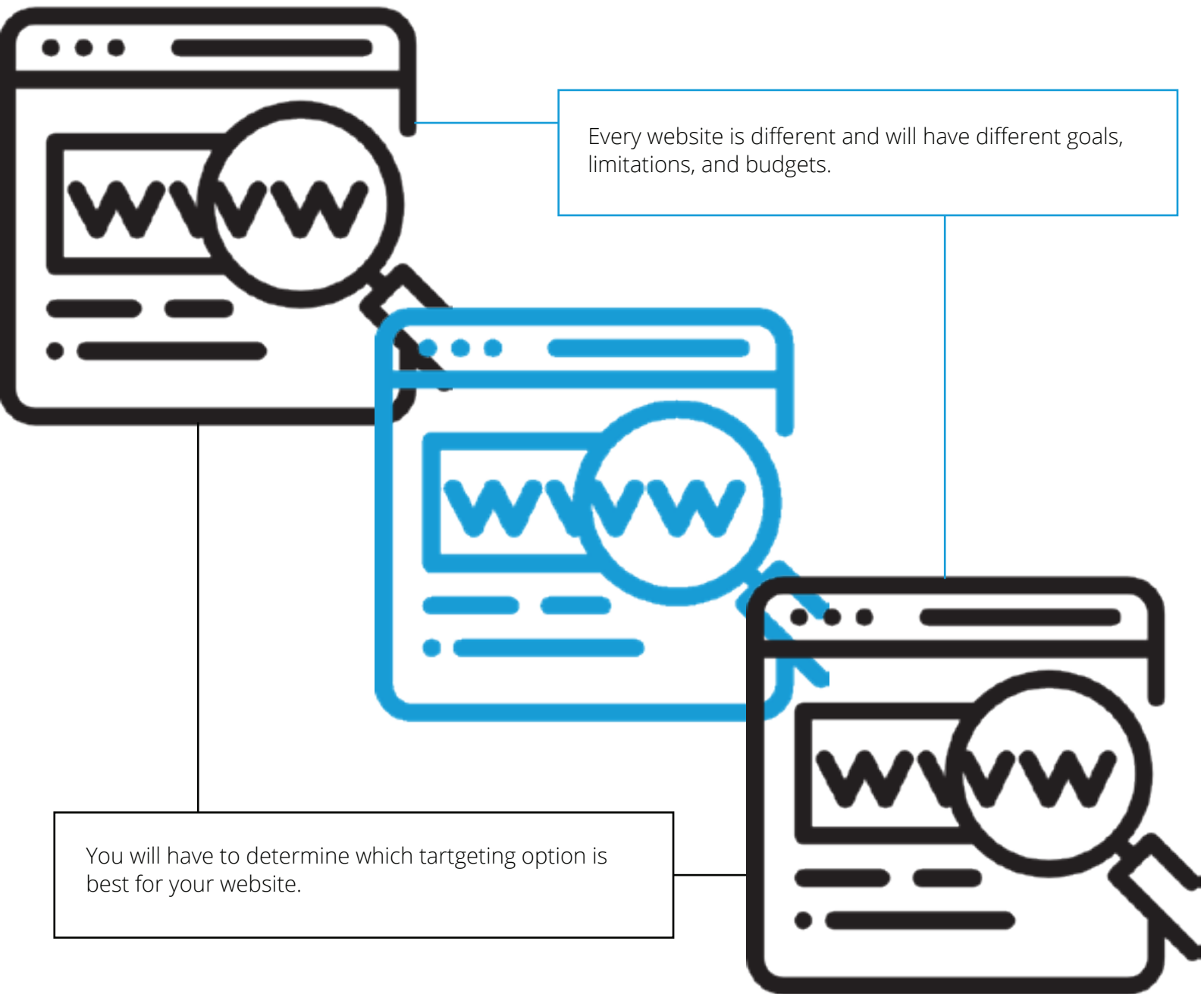
- **Subdomain/subfolder**

ca.domain.com/fr

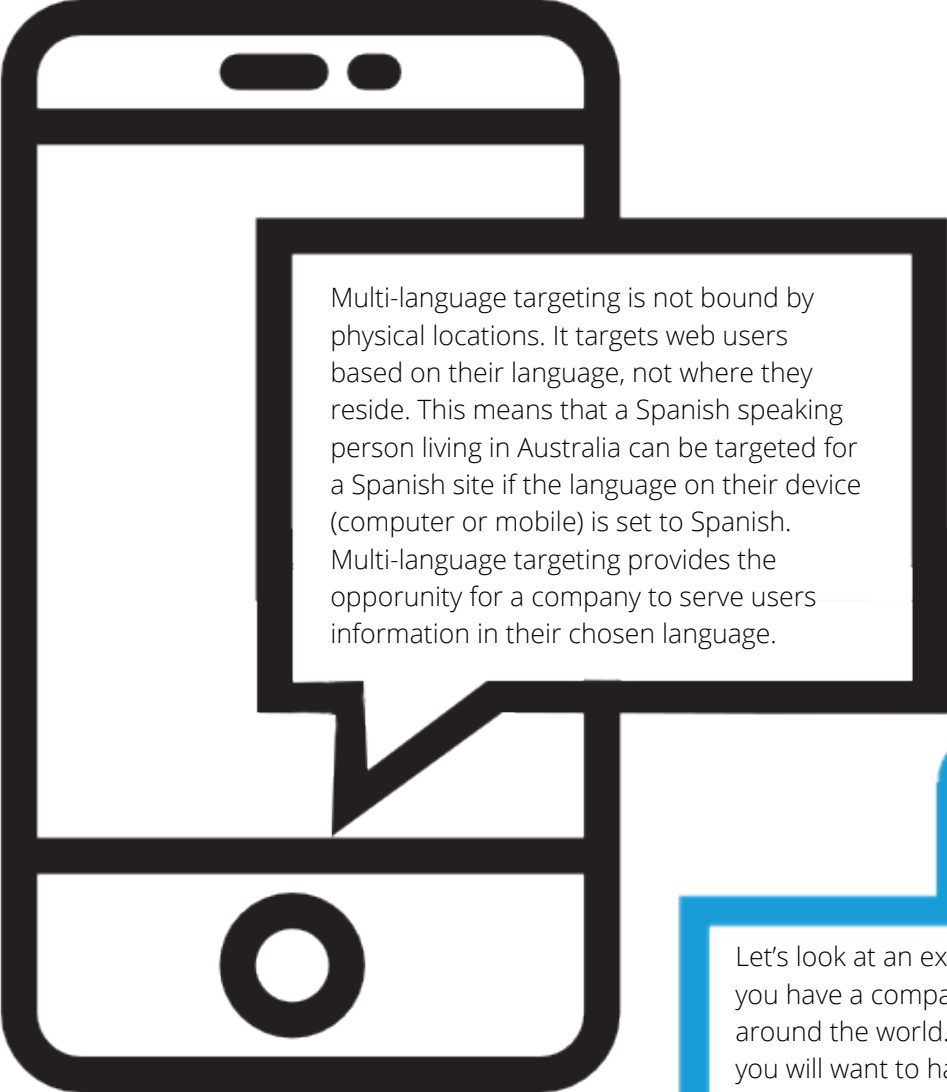
- **Subdomain/parameter**

ca.domain.com/page.html?lang=fr

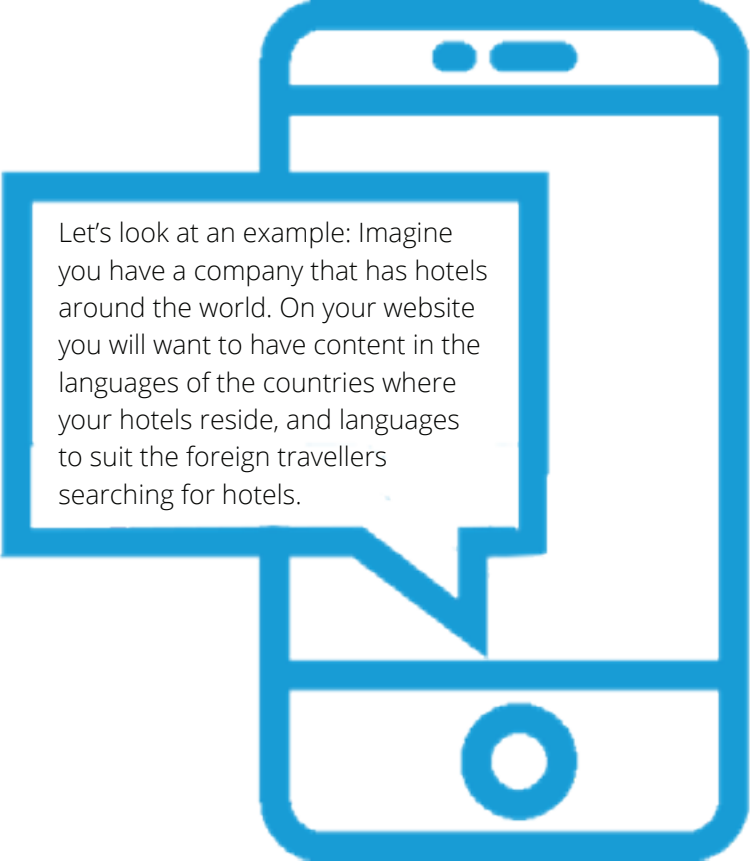
CHOOSING THE RIGHT ONE



MULTI-LANGUAGE TARGETING



Multi-language targeting is not bound by physical locations. It targets web users based on their language, not where they reside. This means that a Spanish speaking person living in Australia can be targeted for a Spanish site if the language on their device (computer or mobile) is set to Spanish. Multi-language targeting provides the opportunity for a company to serve users information in their chosen language.

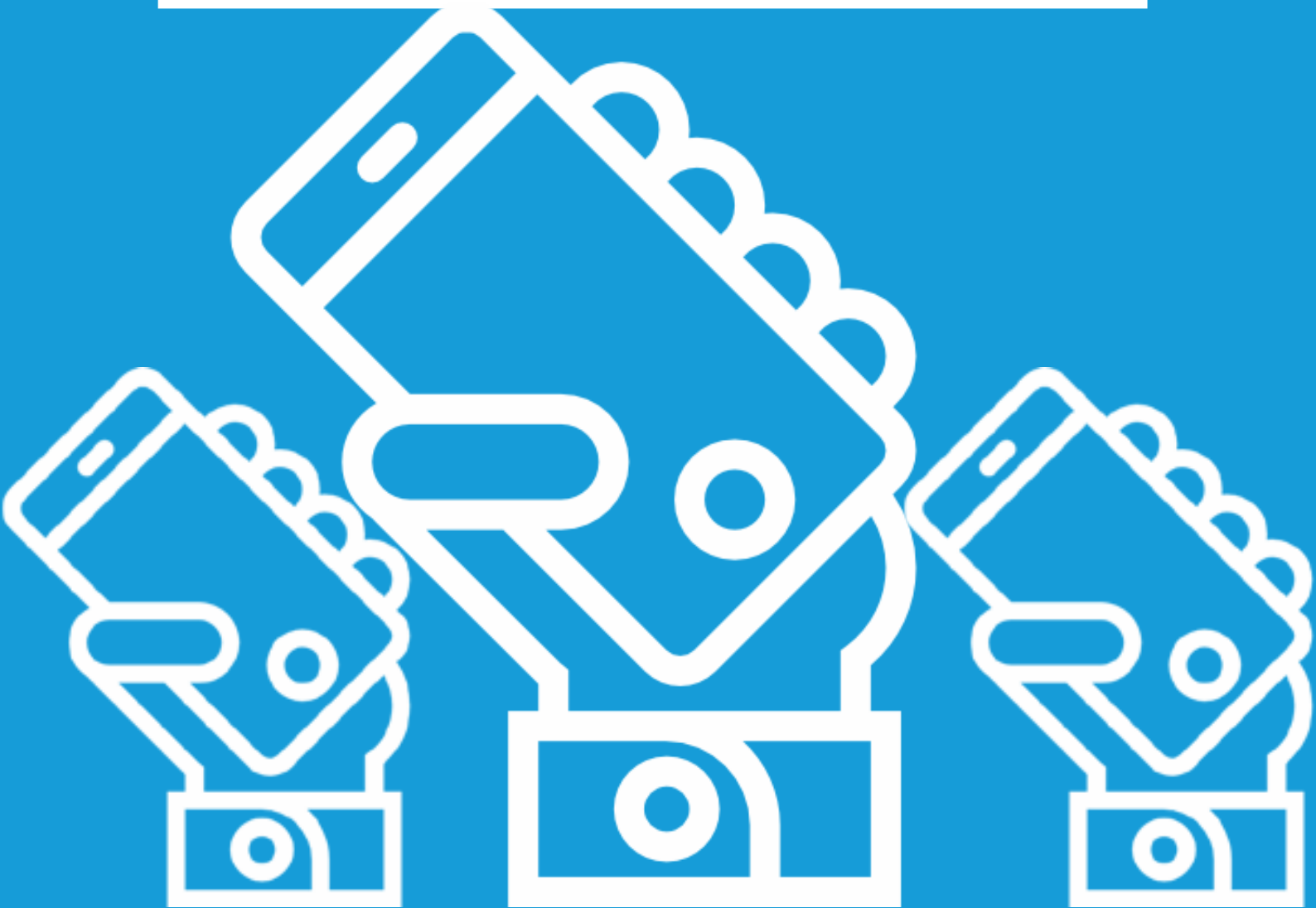


Let's look at an example: Imagine you have a company that has hotels around the world. On your website you will want to have content in the languages of the countries where your hotels reside, and languages to suit the foreign travellers searching for hotels.

MULTI-LANGUAGE TARGETING BEST PRACTICES

Multi-language targeting has a number of options available. Best practices in the industry suggest that it's best to have a single site with the following multi-language SEO techniques:

- Use a generic TLD (such as .com) that can target multiple countries
- Use subfolders to highlight language-specific content (e.g. /en/, /fr/, etc)
- Ensure the site is hosted in the primary market, and has an international content delivery network for site speed maximisation
- Hreflang tags are used to specify to lanugage



ON-SITE CONSIDERATIONS

When optimising your website for international users, you need to not only consider how you target your audience, but also the international user's experience.



You need to provide: content that is tailored to the audience (no matter what country or language), language localisation, domain, and url structure.

ON-SITE CONSIDERATIONS

CONTENT LOCALISATION



WHAT IS CONTENT LOCALISATION?

Content localisation is when you tailor your content to target your audience based on their country or region. By using the local language, currency, time-zone, and local contact information such as addresses and phone numbers, you are sending users and search engines strong signals that your content belongs in that country.

Content localisation should also consider the cultural differences of the places you are targeting. Elements such as colour, layout, tone of voice and sense of humour can be different in different cultures, and tapping into those can make or break your success.

It is not just the words on the website that need to be localised. Every element of the page needs to reflect the locale, including currency, contact numbers, etc. Even if all the copy is translated, if your users are seeing a foreign currency and an overseas contact number they are less likely to take the next step in your conversion funnel.

HOW TO SET UP CONTENT LOCALISATION

When initiating your content localisation, it is important that you also engage in new keyword research. Keywords in different regions and languages will be different to those of your primary site. In order to target those effectively you need to find what those users are searching for.

ON-SITE CONSIDERATIONS

LANGUAGE LOCALISATION



WHAT IS LANGUAGE LOCALISATION?

Language localisation is more than just translating the content on a website. In particular, machine translations of content are highly inaccurate and result in a poor user experience. This can be harmful to your SEO and brand.

ON-SITE CONSIDERATIONS

URL & DOMAIN STRUCTURE



WHAT IS URL AND DOMAIN STRUCTURE?

There are a number of different ways in which you can use URL and domain structure to target particular countries through your website. These include using a:

- Country code top-level domain (ccTLD)
- Subdomain
- Subdirectory or subfolder
- gTLD with language parameters
- Entirely different domain

URL & DOMAIN STRUCTURE

COUNTRY CODE TOP-LEVEL DOMAIN

WHAT IS A COUNTRY CODE TOP-LEVEL DOMAIN (ccTLD)?

Two letter codes that indicate to users and search engines which country, sovereign state or dependent territory a website is registered.

E.g.
example.**ie** (for Ireland)

PROS OF ccTLDs

- Provides the clearest signal to search engines
- Offers the easiest way to rank locally

CONS OF ccTLDs

- Expensive to maintain
- Each site has a separate domain authority if hreflang isn't configured

URL & DOMAIN STRUCTURE

SUBDOMAIN

WHAT IS A SUBDOMAIN?

This method places a website's content on a separate "third-level domain." This method may or may not pass, or receive link authority from the root domain*.

* A root domain is the highest level of a site and is separated from the top-level domain** by a dot (e.g. rootdomain.com).

** The top-level domain is the .com, .edu, .net, etc. of a URL.

E.g.
[ie.example.com](#)

PROS OF SUBDOMAINS

- This option is easier to maintain than ccTLDs

CONS OF SUBDOMAINS

- This option gives a weaker signal to search engines
- May dilute domain authority
- Users prefer to browse locally

URL & DOMAIN STRUCTURE

SUBDIRECTORY

WHAT IS A SUBDIRECTORY?

This method places the international content in a specific subdirectory, or subfolder of the root domain.

E.g.
`example.com/ie`

PROS OF SUBDIRECTORIES

- This option is easier to maintain than ccTLDs
- Consolidates domain authority

CONS OF SUBDOMAINS

- This option gives a weaker signal to search engines
- User prefer to browse locally

URL & DOMAIN STRUCTURE

GENERIC TOP-LEVEL DOMAIN

WHAT IS A GENERIC TOP-LEVEL DOMAIN (gTLD)?

A generic top-level domain (such as .com, .net, etc) targets the speakers of a specific language by adding a language parameter.

E.g.
example.com/?lang=en-ie

PROS OF gTLD

- Easy to set up
- Can use Search Console geotargeting
- Low maintenance (same host)

CONS OF gTLD

- Single server location
- Separation of sites harder
- Users might not recognise geotargeting from the URL alone

URL & DOMAIN STRUCTURE

DIFFERENT DOMAIN

USING DIFFERENT DOMAINS

The content for the international audience is placed on an entirely different website domain. This is not good practice as it does not carry any SEO benefits that you have built from your main website and it will also provide a poor user experience. This option provides a poor user experience particularly if the new domain is named differently as the user might not associate the site with the brand.

E.g.

[exampleireland.com](#)

PROS OF A DIFFERENT DOMAIN

- Provides the clearest signal to search engines
- Offers the easiest way to rank locally

CONS OF A DIFFERENT DOMAIN

- Expensive to maintain
- Each site has a separate domain authority

URL & DOMAIN STRUCTURE

BEST PRACTICES & RECOMMENDATIONS

Best practices and recommendations will vary from site to site. Every website is unique, in terms of performance, and what is best for one website might not work for another. You need to have a look at your own website and determine what is best for you.

When choosing your URL & Domain Structure, keep the following factors in mind:

- Your domain authority
- Your hosting requirements
- Ease of maintenance
- The strength of the geotargeting signal

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CMS

When considering international SEO you need to choose the right Content Management System (CMS) to avoid unwanted limitations to your strategy. CMS's such as **WordPress** and **Magento** are the most flexible options for international SEO. These platforms allow you to configure a website with separate domains, sub-domains, or sub-folders all using the same database. This means that if you update one aspect of the site then it will automatically update all versions of your site. **Shopify** can create challenges if you're looking to use different ccTLDs because you'll need to set up and maintain different back ends for every one of your domains.



This shared database structure saves you a lot of time and simplifies inventory management. A shared database allows you to link pages to the page variant in another language.

If your current site is not built with an internationally-friendly CMS you have three options:
This assumes that your primary website is in English

1. Recreate the website in an international-friendly CMS and replace your English site
2. Transfer the entire website to a new site and then translate everything (you can do this through a website migration, ensuring that you follow the best practices for website migrations to keep your SEO)
3. Create an entirely new website for your foreign language website in a different CMS and keep your existing English website.



CHOOSING A CMS

WORDPRESS



Wordpress is one of the most popular open-source CMS's in the world. The multilingual plugin in WordPress is a translation management tool that allows users to create multilingual, multi-region versions of their site and translate their content easily.

CHOOSING A CMS

SHOPIFY



Shopify is one of the best CMS's available for eCommerce sites, however, do your research first because it can create challenges if you're using multiple ccTLDs. Subfolder or subdomain URLs may be required if you choose Shopify which isn't quite as good as ccTLDs. Weigh up the cost/benefit estimate for your business.

CHOOSING A CMS

MAGENTO



This popular eCommerce platform has multi-site functionality which can be used to configure the different domains or URLs for international targeting. While Magento can be cumbersome, it provides a lot of control for a developer. Offering the content in the local language and currency encourages conversions.