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INTRODUCTION

The World is Shrinking, providing your Business with Limitless Opportunities for Expansion. Are you ready to seize them?



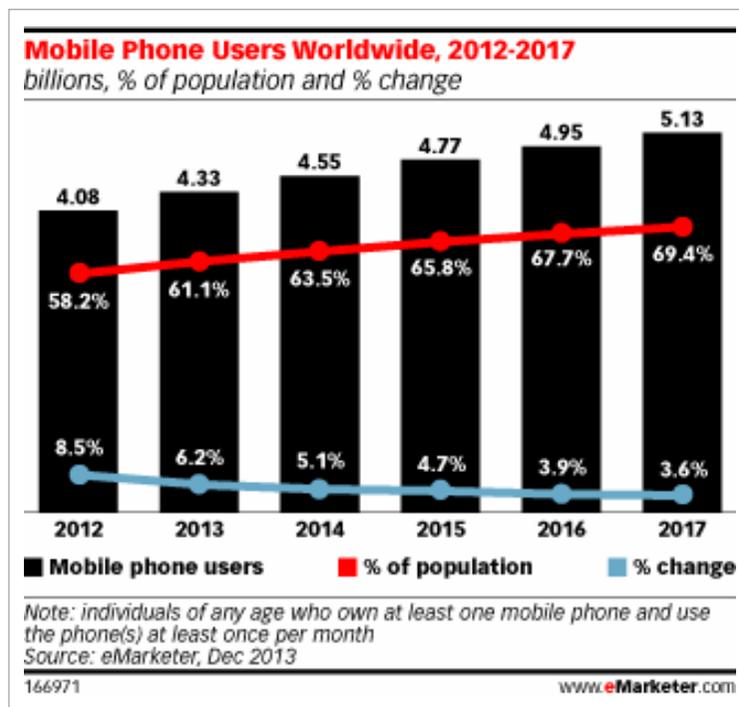
Every day that your business stays local, confined within the boundaries of a single country or language, is a day of missed opportunities. Extending your presence across borders and oceans is vital to establishing ubiquity and increased market share.

Consider this breakdown:

Roughly 300 million **inhabitants** in the US makes 300 million US **consumers**.

In contrast, **Asia-Pacific's middle class alone stands at roughly 550 million today** and is expected to grow to over 3 billion by the year 2030. At that point, Asia-Pacific's middle class will [represent roughly of the world's middle class population.](#)

Take those numbers and consider that low-cost smartphones are available world-wide, providing virtually **EVERYONE** with access to the Internet. eMarketer expects that Smartphone users worldwide will [total 1.75 Billion in 2014.](#)



If you want a piece of the ever-growing pie, represented by this new middle class empowered by smartphones, it's time to start taking your international SEO strategy seriously.

This guide by Gryffin Media will take you through the stages of **establishing a successful international web presence.**

CREATING AN INTERNATIONAL ONLINE MARKETING STRATEGY

The first question that people generally ask is related to site structure. Will you use ccTLD's for your international strategy? Subdomains? Subdirectories? A great deal of planning and analysis is essential before you can make this determination.



1. THE INTERNATIONAL SEARCH LANDSCAPE

Of course the primary search engine we'll discuss is Google due to its massive global market share. Keep in mind that, while Google and Bing are the most prominent search engines in the US, other countries have their own popular search engines. For example, in the Czech Republic it's [Sezam](#). In China, the search engine of choice is [Baidu](#). Japanese web browsers prefer [Yahoo!](#) while Russia widely uses [Yandex](#). Creating an international web presence will enable your brand to have wider exposure on Google and across these country specific search engines.



Google in particular caters to its international clientele with numerous **country code top level domains**, or simply ccTLDs. Below are a few examples of these ccTLD's targeted for specific countries in their native language:

- www.gogle.co.il = Israel
- www.google.com.fr = France
- www.google.com.gh = Ghana
- www.google.con.co = Colombia
- www.google.com.ar = Argentina
- www.google.co.uk = United Kingdom
- www.google.com.br = Brazil

When crafting your international strategy, you'll want to maximize exposure across all of Google's relevant country domains and local search engines.



2. LAYING YOUR FOUNDATION: Planning, Research, Resources and Goals

Before we go any further into creating our strategy, we need to analyze several factors to determine the viability and resources available for this project.

IS YOUR BUSINESS READY TO GO INTERNATIONAL?

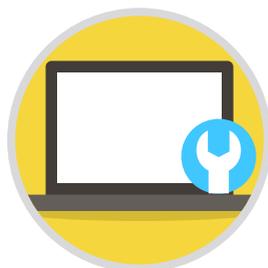
Even by choosing the most cost-effective strategy, internationalizing your web presence will require an investment in time and resources. Does your business have the resources required to set up, sustain and scale your international web presence?

WHAT ARE YOUR AVAILABLE RESOURCES?

- Do you have the ability to set up a local office? If not, can you set up a virtual office with an address and local phone number?
- Do you have customer service representatives available who speak the language?
- Do you have current employees who can translate your content, or will you need professional translators?

- Will you have a dedicated marketing team for each country/language, or will a centralized office manage all of the marketing?
- Will you have a team dedicated to content marketing and link building for each target?
- Do you have a dedicated tech support team who can manage multiple website hosts, domains, SSL certificates, and ccTLD's?

In terms of marketing, these are some of the resources that you'll need to consider for each country/language that you're targeting:



Technical support such as DNS, hosting, SSL cert's



Maintenance and updates based on holiday promotions, security patches, etc



Content development, both for the blog and new product specific content or guides



Link earning and link bait strategies



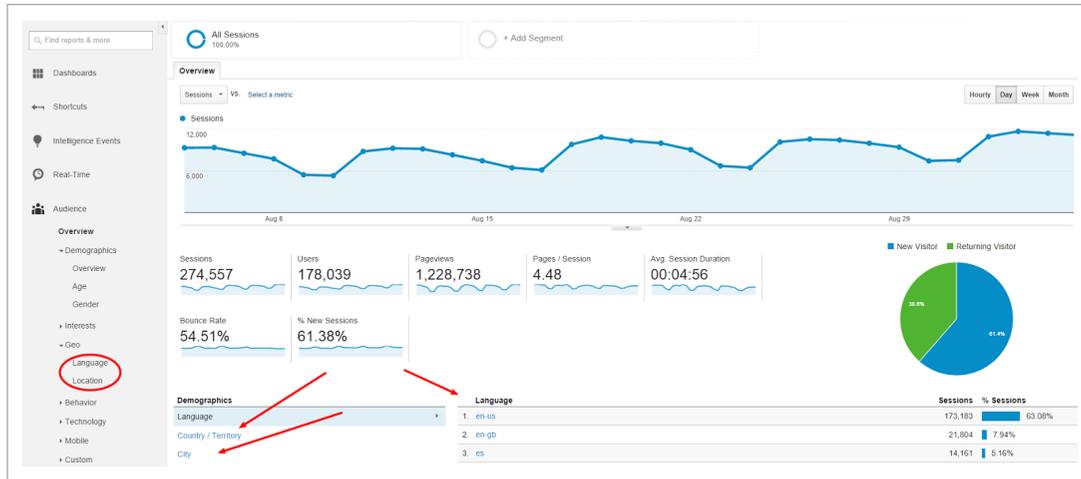
Media outreach to achieve high quality mentions in each country



Country-specific signals, such as a local address and phone number

Answers to these questions will greatly affect how you structure your website and international online marketing campaign.

DOES YOUR BUSINESS HAVE AN INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE?



By going into Audience > Geo in Analytics, you can drill down to find the most popular countries, states and even cities.

Country / Territory ?	Acquisition			Behavior		
	Sessions ? ↓	% New Sessions ?	New Users ?	Bounce Rate ?	Pages / Session ?	Avg. Session Duration ?
	274,557 % of Total: 100.00% (274,557)	61.42% Site Avg: 61.38% (0.07%)	168,641 % of Total: 100.07% (168,523)	54.51% Site Avg: 54.51% (0.00%)	4.48 Site Avg: 4.48 (0.00%)	00:04:56 Site Avg: 00:04:56 (0.00%)
1. 🇺🇸 United States	80,226 (29.22%)	55.98%	44,912 (26.63%)	41.55%	7.38	00:08:18
2. 🇮🇳 India	39,334 (14.33%)	47.92%	18,847 (11.18%)	46.08%	4.88	00:07:09
3. 🇬🇧 United Kingdom	18,360 (6.69%)	76.59%	14,062 (8.34%)	77.20%	2.15	00:01:21
4. 🇧🇷 Brazil	14,313 (5.21%)	77.82%	11,139 (6.61%)	77.82%	1.99	00:01:22
5. 🇨🇦 Canada	9,895 (3.60%)	62.19%	6,154 (3.65%)	52.24%	3.64	00:03:04
6. 🇲🇽 Mexico	8,766 (3.19%)	51.91%	4,550 (2.70%)	55.94%	3.53	00:03:40
7. 🇪🇸 Spain	6,221 (2.27%)	63.41%	3,945 (2.34%)	64.59%	2.48	00:03:01
8. 🇦🇺 Australia	5,568 (2.03%)	60.63%	3,376 (2.00%)	56.43%	3.84	00:05:02
9. 🇭🇰 Hong Kong	5,356 (1.95%)	90.18%	4,830 (2.86%)	17.31%	4.37	00:00:51
10. 🇨🇴 Colombia	5,168 (1.88%)	62.44%	3,227 (1.91%)	71.44%	3.53	00:04:36

You can also drill down to find the most popular languages:

Plot Rows		Secondary dimension		Sort Type: Default	
Language ?	Acquisition			Behavior	
	Sessions ? ↓	% New Sessions ?	New Users ?	Bounce Rate ?	Pages / Session ?
	274,557 % of Total: 100.00% (274,557)	61.42% Site Avg: 61.38% (0.07%)	168,641 % of Total: 100.07% (168,523)	54.51% Site Avg: 54.51% (0.00%)	4.48 Site Avg: 4.48 (0.00%)
<input type="checkbox"/> 1. en-us	173,183 (63.08%)	58.24%	100,867 (59.81%)	47.01%	5.44
<input type="checkbox"/> 2. en-gb	21,804 (7.94%)	67.67%	14,754 (8.75%)	67.06%	3.18
<input type="checkbox"/> 3. es	14,161 (5.16%)	60.94%	8,630 (5.12%)	68.17%	2.63
<input type="checkbox"/> 4. pt-br	13,395 (4.88%)	79.18%	10,606 (6.29%)	79.58%	1.88
<input type="checkbox"/> 5. es-es	4,931 (1.80%)	52.85%	2,606 (1.55%)	58.43%	4.96
<input type="checkbox"/> 6. en	4,467 (1.63%)	76.65%	3,424 (2.03%)	69.06%	2.17
<input type="checkbox"/> 7. fr	4,173 (1.52%)	68.85%	2,873 (1.70%)	64.13%	2.63
<input type="checkbox"/> 8. ru	3,852 (1.40%)	67.39%	2,596 (1.54%)	58.36%	2.49

If you find that you're currently receiving international traffic, you should have a clear road map about what countries/languages to prioritize.

If you don't currently have an international audience, you'll have to rely on market research to determine international viability using tools like [Google's Global Market Finder](#), [Google Trends](#), and [Search Metrics](#).

WHAT ARE YOUR COMPANY'S GOALS FOR YOUR INTERNATIONAL PRESENCE?

While some companies may be primarily concerned with ROI, others may be looking for branding KPI's, while others may be interested in lead acquisition.

Establishing clear goals, objectives, and Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) will help shape and track the effectiveness of your campaign.

Some examples of goals and KPI's include:

- To increase converted clicks by 50% at a \$15 CPA
- To generate 5 leads per month from France at a cost of \$5000 investment / month
- To brand our company in Mexico to prepare for a product launch

Be as specific as you can when writing your goals and KPI's.



3. WHAT ARE SOME KNOWN INTERNATIONAL RANKING SIGNALS?

Google uses over 200 ranking factors in their algorithms to determine how websites are displayed in the search results page. When talking in the context of international rankings, you have to consider the same 200 ranking factors, plus modifiers that impact rankings across their international ccTLD's:



1. Top Level Domains



2. Server Location



3. Geotargeting



4. Local Signals

1. Top Level Domains: These are country-code specific top-level domains, such as .co.uk and .au. These are one of the strongest and most trusted signals for a local presence.

2. Server Location: With the growth of cloud hosting services like Amazon and other CDN's, server location is becoming a smaller signal. Nonetheless it's still one to keep in mind. Hosting in the country you're targeting is a signal to consider. If

you're hosting in Germany, you get a stronger association with Germany. If your domain is a .de domain, that reinforces your domain's association with that country.

3. Geotargeting: This is determined on a site's Webmaster Tools account settings. Site owners can tell Google what country their site (or subdomain or subdirectory) is targeting.

4. Local Signals: Other elements such as physical address, local phone number, local currency, and even links from other local websites can help Google determine the ideal

country target for that website.

Keep these in mind as you learn about the pros and cons of different domain structures.



4. WHAT ARE YOUR TARGETING OBJECTIVES?

The first decision to be made is whether you should target by **COUNTRY** or by **LANGUAGE**. With personalization and individualized results based on location, search history, etc, there's no way to achieve a "global" Google ranking.

If your product is information based and geographic targeting isn't a huge consideration, then you may be able to proceed with

language targeting. **Language targeting** is suitable when location doesn't influence your goals, content, service and product offerings.

Your site structure would be language-centric, as you can see in the example below:

<https://www.weusecoins.com/en/>
<https://www.weusecoins.com/fr/>

In this case, we are showing subdirectories, but the same can be accomplished with subdomains.

If geographic location matters, which is the case when you're shipping products, or want customers to view your prices in their native currency and/or to receive local support, then you'll focus on a **Country-specific targeting strategy**.

Website structure for a country-

specific targeting strategy could be either ccTLD's, subdomains, or subdirectories.

An example of a country specific structure is:

<http://www.polisheddiamonds.us/>

<http://www.polisheddiamonds.co.nz/>

<http://www.polisheddiamonds.com.au/>

<http://www.polisheddiamonds.co.za/>



5. DETERMINE YOUR INTERNATIONAL SITE STRUCTURE

This is the most complicated aspect of your international strategy. There isn't a single "straightforward" approach that works for all businesses. There are pros and cons for every choice, and businesses have to study all of the factors to choose a pathway to success.

THE PROS AND CONS OF CCTLD'S

PROS



1. Geographic signals improve local rankings for the target country/language.
2. Google uses the ccTLD component as a "strong indicator" for geo-targeting the website.
3. Server location becomes even more irrelevant.
4. Each site can have a unique design targeted at the local audience.
5. Can be geotargeted separately using Webmaster Tools.

CONS

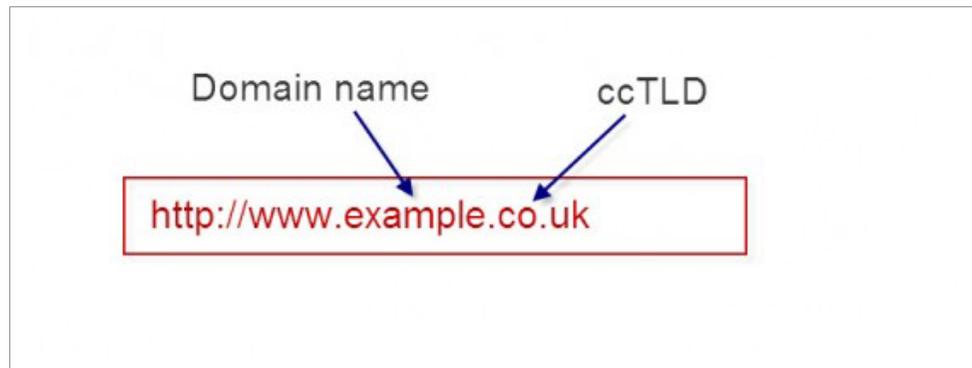


1. If you don't have a local presence, these may be hard to acquire as there can be restrictions.
2. They can also be exponentially expensive.
3. Require more infrastructure, such as a local shopping cart if yours is an ecommerce site, separate hosting, separate content, etc.
3. Each ccTLD has to be marketed as an individual website, with links earned for each domain. You will need an SEO strategy for each separate domain.

THE PROS AND CONS OF CCTLD'S

What are ccTLD's? ccTLD's are country-code top level domain names. They are the clearest indicator of geographical targeting for search engines.

If a site is in German, with a .de domain, and hosted in Germany, Google can have almost complete certainty that this site is targeted to an audience searching google.de in German.



THE PROS AND CONS OF SUBDOMAINS

PROS



1. Can be geotargeted separately using Webmaster Tools.
2. You can host each subdomain on a separate host (local hosting).
3. Easy to separate the sites and set up.

CONS

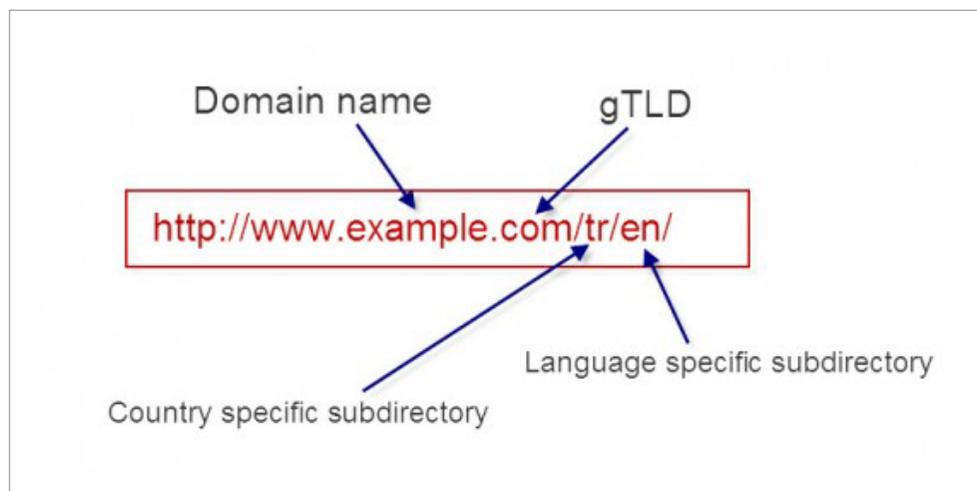


1. Each subdomain has to be treated as a unique domain which requires a separate SEO strategy.
2. No benefit from Google in terms of clear geotargeting.
3. Local Searcher bias: Users may skip over your results because they prefer to visit local sites.

THE PROS AND CONS OF SUBDOMAINS

Subdomains can be hosted separately but exist within the gTLD (generic top level domain name) of the registered domain. Subdomains could be language or country specific.

For example, you could have es.bitcoin.org or fr.bitcoin.org. In addition, you could also go for spanish.bitcoin.org or english.bitcoin.org



THE PROS AND CONS OF SUBDIRECTORIES

PROS



CONS



1. Domain Authority and Trustrank gets passed across the domain.

1. Shows the weakest signal in terms of geo targeting, as no local ccTLD or hosting is used.

2. Easy to set up and can be done within your existing site structure.

2. The geo targeting is unclear for users.

3. Can be geotargeted separately using Webmaster Tools.

3. Difficult to determine what content to place on the home page.

4. Lower costs, as you don't need to pay for separate domains or hosting.

4. Local Searcher bias: Users may skip over your results because they prefer to visit local sites.

5. A penalty accrued on the domain will impact rankings across all countries.

THE PROS AND CONS OF SUBDIRECTORIES

Subdirectories are mostly valued because they allow Authority to be passed amidst the different sections of the site. If you get trusted, authoritative links to a section of your site, it benefits your site as a whole. For this reason, many companies choose this approach for their international marketing strategy.

6. WHAT STRUCTURE SHOULD YOU CHOOSE?

Should you focus on Language or Geographic Targeting?

Even though language targeting can be the quickest and simplest way to reach an international audience, you miss out on many of the benefits of Google's ccTLD structure.

Geographic targeting can start small and be scaled over time. For example, if you notice that you have a large number of users who

search your site in French, start a country-specific strategy targeting users in Canada and France. Over time, you can add targeting for other languages based on the countries where they are most spoken.

If you do choose the simplest language targeting option, subdirectories are ideal so you can benefit from the Domain Authority of your existing domain.



BEST CASE SCENARIO FOR GEOGRAPHIC TARGETING

The safest structure is to use ccTLD's. Companies that have the budget and resources should choose a separate ccTLD strategy in order to set up the clearest geo targeting signals. Your locally targeted ccTLD's will immediately have stronger signals to outperform other sites with subdirectories or subdomains, will rank with fewer links, and will attract the largest number of clicks from local searches as they'll be biased to believe the content is targeted at them.

Key to succeeding with separate ccTLD's is to understand that each

domain has to stand on its own, with a dedicated content marketing, link earning, and social media campaign. You'll need to create quality content and trusted links for each of the domains. This is the safest and most powerful strategy both in terms of usability and search engine rankings.

You can design the website according to the culture of the country you are targeting, set the local currency, add the local address and phone number, and make it clear that you have a strong presence in that country. With a local team, you should be able to gain access to social and link earning opportunities.



Subdirectories: The Next Best Thing

SUBDIRECTORIES: THE NEXT BEST THING

Your profitable business could greatly benefit from a larger international audience, but you don't yet have the resources to establish local offices in each country, nor the budget to promote separate domains.

If you don't have the resources to successfully market to each country with a dedicated website, **using subdirectories would be the best choice.**

The most powerful benefit of using subdirectories is that Domain Authority is passed across the domain.

Google's current ranking algorithm is heavily influenced by authoritative brands. **It's an algorithm that highly values TRUST** by providing great visibility to sites that have a large volume of trusted links.



By using subdirectories, links acquired across your different subdirectories will boost the overall authority of the domain, which will in turn improve visibility across all language/country targeted pages. If, for example, a large media outlet in France links to one of your French pages, that counts as a trusted link for the domain which will in turn help your pages targeted at the UK to rank higher. In today's tough link earning panorama, this one benefit is **worth gold**.

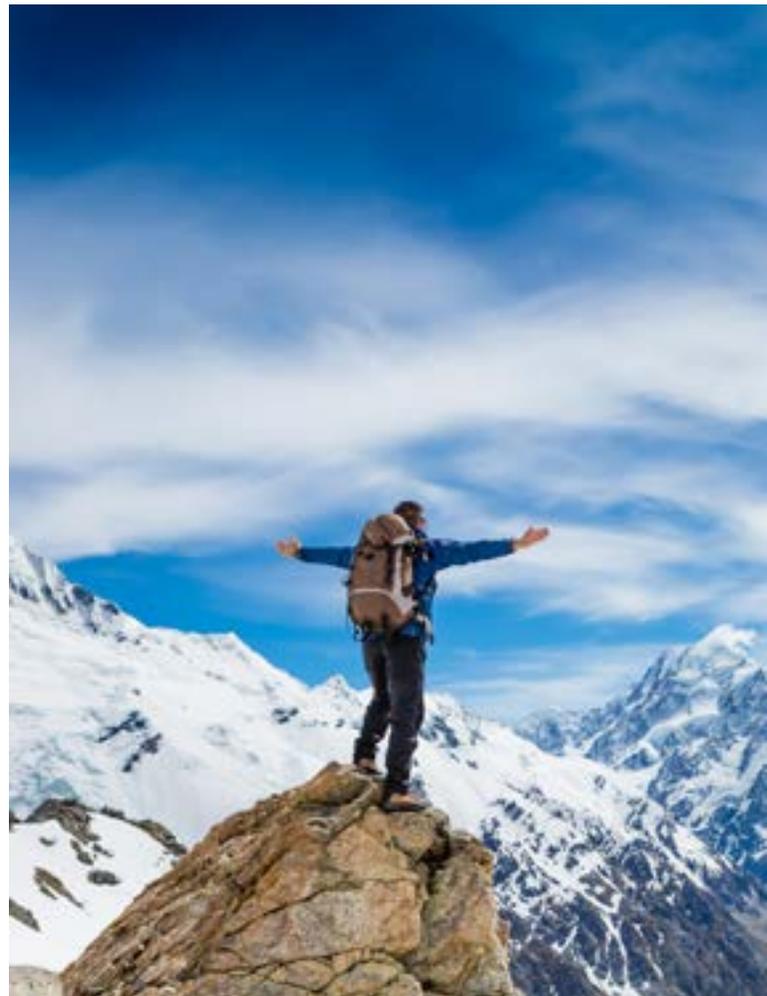
But before you jump all in and go with the subdirectory strategy, you need to understand that if you will be having multiple agents in charge of different parts of the site, you **NEED** to be very careful. A rogue agent in France that buys low quality links to his subdirectory could in turn result in a penalty for the entire domain, thus suppressing rankings for the entire site. **This is the strategy that requires the most control and oversight, as well as vigilant monitoring.**

If you choose this strategy, it will become increasingly important for you to use other signals, such as adding a local address, local phone number, and geographic targeting in

webmaster tools, to help improve the rankings for each country.

WHAT ABOUT SUBDOMAINS?

Subdomains don't have the benefit of passing Domain Authority, and have similar benefits as subdirectories in terms of geolocations. Unless there is a specific reason for your company to use subdomains, they're not recommended for your domain structure strategy.



PLAN FOR SCALABILITY!

Of course it's possible to start with one strategy and adjust it in the future. However, it's not unheard of or uncommon for sites to lose rankings when major changes in URL or domain architecture are implemented. If you suddenly switch around thousands of URL's, you're telling Google that there's been a major change to your site. Google may then decide not to inherently trust your site any more, as it has been restructured, and you may lose many of your rankings.

Be consistent with your strategy! Both in terms of rankings and user experience, you want the URL strategy to remain consistent within itself and over time. For example, don't have a few countries as subdirectories and others as subdomains, as that can be confusing for users. Plan carefully so you can reap the rewards in the long run.



7. WHY LOCALIZED PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATIONS ARE A MUST!

Your translations should be created by professional translators native to the country you are targeting who can understand the language nuances of each country.

This leads to the next tricky question: what about targeting different countries who speak the same language but use different spellings or expressions? The classic example is US versus UK English.

Should you have separate versions for these countries, and localize your content?

The answer to this question, once again, has to be connected to the ROI and resources conversation.

It would of course be ideal to have a version of the site written in UK English, targeted at Google.co.uk, instead of trying to get your .com site to rank in the UK. If you have the resources to implement this level of granularity, then this would be ideal.

If you are just starting out and would like the largest global visibility, consider a configuration such as:

LOCALIZED PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATIONS



- 1 English: Rest of the world: en
- 2 English: US - en-us
- 3 English: GB - en-gb

- 4 English: Australia - en-au
- 5 English: Canada - en-ca
- 6 French: France - fr-fr

- 7 French: Canada - fr-ca
- 8 Portuguese: Brazil - pt-br
- 9 Spanish: Mexico - es-mx

- 10 Spanish: Spain - es-es
- 11 Spanish: USA - es-us
- 12 Spanish: Rest of the world: es

- 13 German: Germany: de
- 14 Italian: Italy: it

Knowing what countries and languages you're targeting from the very beginning will help you when creating your structure and when protecting your site from duplication, which we'll discuss shortly.

In case you're wondering if you can use automatic translation, this is a huge no-no. Google warns against using automatic translation tools, including their own "translate" feature, and will in some cases consider this spam. If you decided to use Google's translation tool, it's important to block those pages from the crawlers so they don't result in content penalties.

Professional local translations are the only way to internationalize effectively.



8. SERVING THE GOD OF USER EXPERIENCE: Elements of Successful International Usability

Now that you have a domain architecture and localized translations, let's talk about how to integrate all of these elements into the site itself.

First of all, you need to be respectful to your international audience by not using code that forces them into a particular language or country-specific version based on their IP or browser language.

Internationalization is all about providing options for your users to find the language, currency, and geographic version of your site that is most suitable for them.

Next, let's look at the elements that comprise a successfully internationalized website:



1. Translate your URL's



2. Link your Country/Language versions visibly on every page of the site(s)



3. Use unique Titles, Descriptions, and Headings.



4. Include Local Contact and Support Information.



5. Use Google's Local Business Center



6. Use Country-Specific Currency



7. All of Navigational Elements and Images should be translated.



8. Optimize Images and Alt tags



9. Comments and Reviews

1. Translate your URL's: Make sure you use keyword research to find the best keywords to select for your URL's and translate any folders that are in the URL pathway.

2. Link your Country/Language versions visibly on every page of the site(s): Whether you choose to place your country/language selector at the header or footer of your site, make it easy for users to navigate across your different targeting options. Many websites simply set up the country/language locator to go back to the home page of other language/country versions. If possible, link all of the country versions to each other, so if you find a product page in English but want to read that same page in Spanish, you can go straight to that page without having to go to the Spanish home page to start your search.

3. Use unique Titles, Descriptions, and Headings: Based on country-specific keyword research, make sure you're using localized titles and descriptions for every page. For example, in the US people may use terms such as "bachelor party", whereas in the UK,

the term would be "stag party"

4. Include Local Contact and Support Information: If you don't have an office in every country, look for virtual office services that will allow you to have a local address. Choose international phone services like Tollfreeforwarding to create local phone numbers for every country. Make sure you use schema.org markup for your phone number and address. The address should be listed in plain text on the site-wide footer, contact, or about page.

5. Use Google's Local Business Center: where available, make sure you create an account with Google Local business, using your local address, phone number, and business hours.

6. Use Country-Specific Currency: Using the local currency will help both users and search engines, as it's another marker of specific country-targeting

7. All of Navigational Elements and Images should be translated: Don't leave parts of your menu in another language.

8. Optimize Images and Alt tags:

Don't forget to translate your alt tags and image title tags. Make sure even product or promotional images are properly translated.

If you focus on providing a great international user experience and make it easy for Google to understand who you are targeting, then you can reap the rewards in terms of visibility.

9. Comments and Reviews:

If your site accepts product reviews, make sure the functionality can be translated so people are encouraged to leave comments/reviews in their native language.



9. HOW TO PREVENT DUPLICATE CONTENT ISSUES AND PENALTIES

If you've already had the opportunity to encounter the vicious Panda, you know this is an animal to be taken seriously. Panda is an algorithmic filter that Google uses to demote sites with duplicate content or structural issues. It can cause a site's ranking, and traffic, to plummet. Multinational SEO is a territory that is ripe for Panda penalties due to the possibility of creating multiple pages with the exact same content targeting different countries.

In this section, we'll discuss different tactics to both prevent penalties as well as to help Google understand your targeting objectives and structure.

GEO TARGETING IN WEBMASTER TOOLS

Whether you use ccTLD's, subdomains or subdirectories, you can create a separate profile in Webmaster Tools for each of your country-specific sites/ sections.

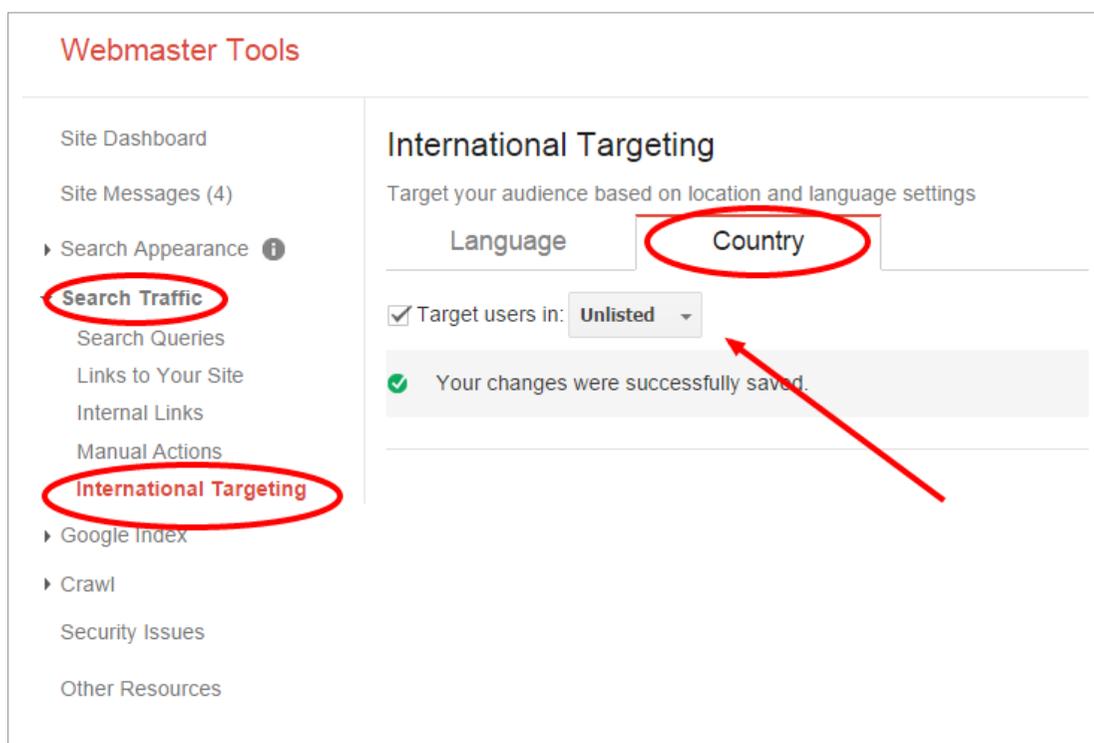
First, let's talk about how to [Verify your domain in Webmaster Tools](#). You can choose a variety of verification methods, such as uploading an HTML

file via FTP or adding a meta tag to your domain.

If you are going to use subdomains or subdirectories, you'll need to use [DNS verification](#), proving that you have control of that domain.

Once you've verified the domain, you can go through the "Add a Site" steps in Webmaster Tools for your specific subdirectory or subdomain.

Next, go to your relevant Webmaster Tools profile, click on Search Traffic > International Targeting > Country, and select the country you're targeting on that domain/subdomain/subdirectory:



You should have a “core” domain set up to pick up the “rest of the world” traffic that isn’t translated or geotargeted. For that domain, leave it as “unlisted” in Webmaster Tools.

This feature is for GEOTARGETING, not language targeting. If you have multiple language versions within the same subdirectory, you’ll have to choose just one language or country to target. Breaking up your subdirectories into the Language-Country targeting format is ideal for making sure you can geo target each version of the site appropriately.

USE HREFLANG TAGS TO AVOID DUPLICATE CONTENT

Hreflang is a tag introduced by Google to help them deal with multiregional and multilingual websites. According to them, “Google uses the rel=“alternate” hreflang=“x” attributes to serve the correct language or regional URL in Search results.”

This tag can be used in 3 different places on your site:



- **HTML link element in header.** In the HTML `<head>` section of `http://www.example.com/`, add a `link` element pointing to the Spanish version of that webpage at `http://es.example.com/`, like this:
`<link rel="alternate" hreflang="es" href="http://es.example.com/" />`
- **HTTP header.** If you publish non-HTML files (like PDFs), you can use an [HTTP header](#) to indicate a different language version of a URL:
`Link: <http://es.example.com/>; rel="alternate"; hreflang="es"`
- **Sitemap.** Instead of using markup, you can submit language version information in a Sitemap.

Even though you CAN use the HTML link element on HTTP header, in this document I will focus on using sitemaps to provide hreflang page sets for Google, as it’s the most viable, scalable methodology currently available.

Choose only one method - http header, sitemap, or html link element - and use it consistently. Using multiple hreflang markups is not advisable.

CREATE A SEPARATE SITEMAP FOR EACH COUNTRY TARGETED SITE/SECTION

There are many restrictions to the amount of characters every sitemap can have. If you have a small 10-20 page site, then uploading multiple sitemaps may be unnecessary. But if you have a large website with hundreds of thousands of pages, you may want to consider creating a separate XML site map for each of your location specific versions. If each of your domains/subdomains/subdirectories is verified in Webmaster Tools, you won't have any issues submitting the sitemaps separately.

START BY CREATING A SPREADSHEET GROUPING TRANSLATIONS OR LOCALIZATIONS INTO SETS

Once you determine what countries/languages you're going to target, add all of the URL's that will be translated/localized to a spreadsheet.

Then, add the URL of the different versions of each page across languages/locations:

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
1	x-default	en-us	fr-be	nl-be	de	es	fr	it	ru	fr-ch	de-ch	it-ch	en-gb
2	http://www.ex	http://us.	http://be.	http://be.	http://de.	http://es.	http://fr.	http://it.	http://ru.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://uk.
3	http://www.example.cor	http://be.	http://be.	http://de.	http://es.	http://fr.	http://example.cc	http://ru.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://uk.
4	http://www.example.cor	http://be.	http://be.	http://de.	http://es.	http://fr.	http://example.cc	http://ru.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://uk.
5	http://www.ex	http://us.	http://be.	http://be.	http://de.	http://es.	http://fr.	http://example.cc	http://ru.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://uk.
6	http://www.example.cor	http://be.	http://be.	http://de.	http://es.	http://fr.	http://example.cc	http://ru.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://uk.
7	http://www.example.cor	http://be.	http://be.	http://de.	http://es.	http://fr.	http://example.cc	http://ru.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://ch.	http://uk.

Here you'll have a clear way to visualize all of the pages and page sets that you'll be dealing with.

CREATE AN XML SITE MAP WITH YOUR URL'S GROUPED INTO SETS

In this page, Google explains [how to use a sitemap to indicate alternate language pages](#). Here's what a URLset looks like:

```
✓ <?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8">
<urlset xmlns="http://www.sitemaps.org/schemas/sitemap/0.9"
xmlns:xhtml="http://www.w3.org/1999/xhtml">
<url>
<loc>http://www.example.com/english/</loc>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="de"
href="http://www.example.com/deutsch/"
/>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="de-ch"
href="http://www.example.com/schweiz-deutsch/"
/>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="en"
href="http://www.example.com/english/"
/>
</url>
<url>
<loc>http://www.example.com/deutsch/</loc>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="en"
href="http://www.example.com/english/"
/>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="de-ch"
href="http://www.example.com/schweiz-deutsch/"
/>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="de"
href="http://www.example.com/deutsch/"
/>
</url>
<url>
<loc>http://www.example.com/schweiz-deutsch/</loc>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="de"
href="http://www.example.com/deutsch/"
/>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="en"
href="http://www.example.com/english/"
/>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="de-ch"
href="http://www.example.com/schweiz-deutsch/"
/>
</url>
</urlset>
```

Be sure to study this page carefully, as they include other important notes to consider, such as including every alternate version of the page, **including itself**.

Here's an example of a page set targeting 2 different languages and 2 separate geographical regions:

```
<url>
  <loc>http://www.yoursite.com</loc>
  <xhtml:link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-ca" href="http://www.yoursite.com/en-ca">
  <xhtml:link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-gb" href="http://www.yoursite.com/en-gb">
  <xhtml:link rel="alternate" hreflang="es-co" href="http://www.yoursite.com/en-co">
  <xhtml:link rel="alternate" hreflang="de" href="http://www.yoursite.com/de">
</url>
```

USING THE RIGHT COUNTRY AND LANGUAGE (ISO) CODES

You may be wondering why we always speak in country and language codes when we give examples. Why does it have to be en-gb and not en-uk?

These codes are based on Language Codes and Country Codes based on ISO. According to Wikipedia, [ISO 639](#) is a standardized nomenclature used to classify all known languages.

Below are a few examples:

Language name	Native name	639-1
Abkhaz	аԥсуа бызшәа, аԥсшәа	ab
Afar	Afaraf	aa
Afrikaans	Afrikaans	af
Akan	Akan	ak
Albanian	Shqip	sq
Amharic	አማርኛ	am
Arabic	العربية	ar
Aragonese	aragonés	an
Armenian	Հայերեն	hy
Assamese	অসমীয়া	as
Avaric	авар мацӀ, магӀарул мацӀ	av
Avestan	avesta	ae
Aymara	aymar aru	ay
Azerbaijani	azərbaycan dili	az
Bambara	bamanankan	bm
Bashkir	башҡорт теле	ba
Basque	euskara, euskera	eu
Belarusian	беларуская мова	be
Bengali, Bangla	বাংলা	bn
Bihari	भोजपुरी	bh
Bislama	Bislama	bi
Bosnian	bosanski jezik	bs
Breton	brezhoneg	br
Bulgarian	български език	bg
Burmese	ဗမာစာစု	my
Catalan, Valencian	català, valencià	ca
--	--	-

[ISO 3166-1](#) alpha-2 codes re two-letter country codes published by the International Organization for Standardization to represent countries, dependent territories, and special areas of geographical interest.

Code ↕	Country name ↕	Year ↕	ccTLD ↕
AD	Andorra	1974	.ad
AE	United Arab Emirates	1974	.ae
AF	Afghanistan	1974	.af
AG	Antigua and Barbuda	1974	.ag
AI	Anguilla	1983	.ai
AL	Albania	1974	.al
AM	Armenia	1992	.am
AO	Angola	1974	.ao
AQ	Antarctica	1974	.aq
AR	Argentina	1974	.ar
AS	American Samoa	1974	.as
AT	Austria	1974	.at
AU	Australia	1974	.au
AW	Aruba	1986	.aw
AX	Åland Islands	2004	.ax
AZ	Azerbaijan	1992	.az
BA	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1992	.ba
BB	Barbados	1974	.bb
BD	Bangladesh	1974	.bd
BE	Belgium	1974	.be

Distilled created a cheat sheet with google ccTLD's, country codes, language codes, and target countries, which you can [view here](#) or [download here](#).

You can also use the [hreflang Tags Generator tool](#) to make sure you're using the correct country/language codes.

Start by entering your country/language combinations:

Generate the hreflang tags now:

www.domain.com English Canada

www.domain.com English United States

Remove

www.domain.com English Australia

Remove

www.domain.com English United Kingdom

Remove

+ Add an additional language / country URL version

Are you Done? Get the hreflang tags for these URLs

Click on “Are you done” and you’ll get the tags that you need, ready to be copied or downloaded to a CSV:

Here are the hreflang tags to include in the relevant URLs HTML <head> area:

```
<link rel="alternate" href="www.domain.com" hreflang="en-us" />
<link rel="alternate" href="www.domain.com" hreflang="en-au" />
<link rel="alternate" href="www.domain.com" hreflang="en-gb" />
<link rel="alternate" href="www.domain.com" hreflang="en" />
```

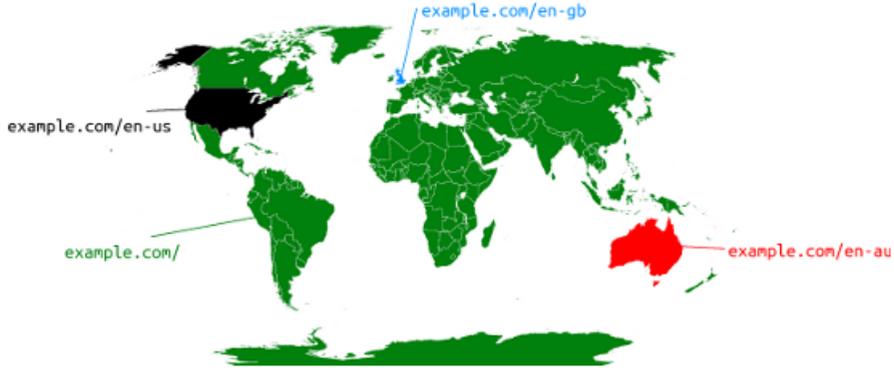
You can [Copy to clipboard](#) or [Download as CSV](#).

It’s important that you use both the 2 letter country codes and the 2 letter language codes correctly when creating your hreflang annotations in your sitemap.

Using X-Default

According to Google, the new x-default hreflang attribute value signals to our algorithms that this page does not target any specific language or locale and is the default page when no other page is better suited. “

Let’s look at an example:



- <http://example.com/en-gb>: For English-speaking users in the UK
- <http://example.com/en-us>: For English-speaking users in the USA
- <http://example.com/en-au>: For English-speaking users in Australia
- <http://example.com/>: The homepage shows users a country selector and is the default page for users worldwide

In this case, the webmaster can annotate this cluster of pages using [rel-alternate-hreflang](#) using [Sitemaps](#) or using HTML link tags like this:

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

In most cases, the version of your site where you have your largest office will be the one you annotate as x-default. If you are in the US with a .com, then you’ll use the same formatting as the example above. If your main headquarters are in the UK and you have a .co.uk domain that you’re attempting to rank for the rest of the world, you’ll want that domain to be marked as x-default in your site map.

Using Tools to Create your XML Site Maps

Some sitemap tool vendors have already updated their systems to deal with the hreflang functionality. If not, The Media Flow created a tool to create XML site maps including hreflang tags. This tool requires a CSV file as an input, and will then output the XML code.

Hreflang Summary

The entire discourse around hreflang can appear convoluted and difficult to understand, when in reality it is simple. It's basically a tag that allows you to let Google know the language/country targeting for different pages on your site. If you think of your translated/localized pages in terms of sets, all you're doing is using this tag/sitemap to tell Google what pages to rank for which of their search ccTLD's. Look beyond the jargon to see this as a tool to assist you in improving your local rankings and avoiding duplicate content issues or penalties.

What about Canonical Tags?

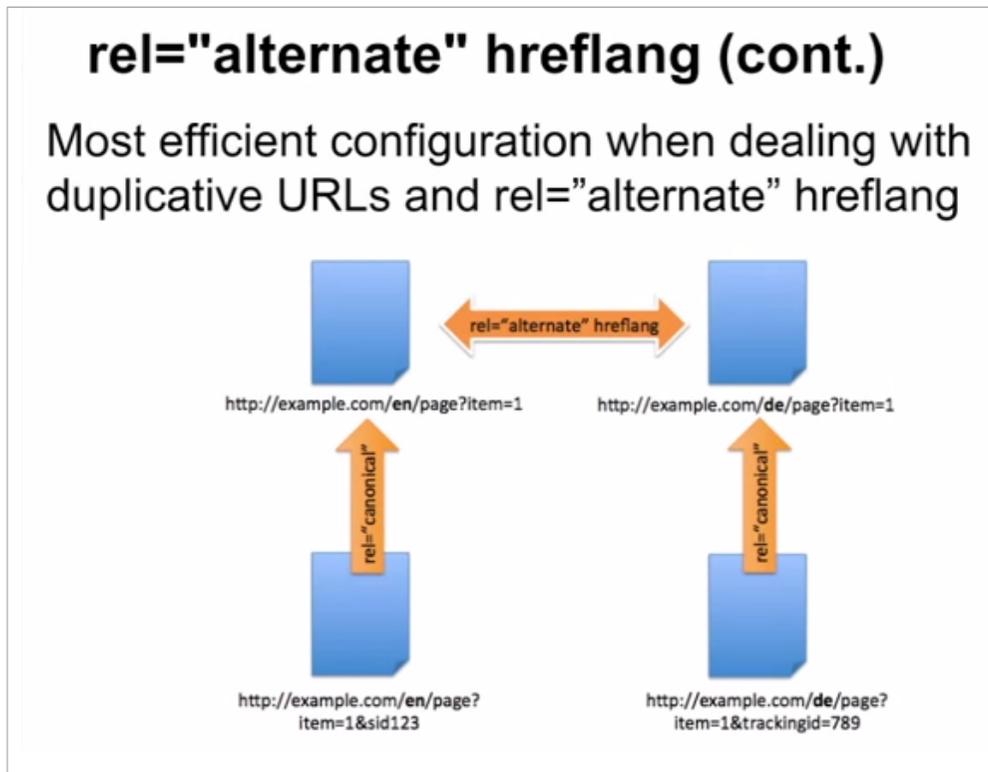
Whenever people look at hreflang tags, then the natural question arises regarding canonical tags. Should these be used in conjunction with hreflang tags or sitemaps?

There are different opinions on this subject, ranging from NEVER to USE CAREFULLY.

In general, canonical tags should only be used if you would use them normally. For example, if you're using canonical tags because your CMS created 10 versions of the same product page - one page for every product image - that is an instance where you'd want to use canonical tags to tell Google which one is the main URL.

You can continue to use a canonical tag in this instance, and the hreflang will then exist on top of the canonical tag grouping the pages together.

This graph by Google describes it clearly:



So you would still have canonical tags pointing to your root pages, which in turn are correlated to their translated/localized pages. This way, the canonical tags take care of multiple versions of the same page due to technical reason, and hreflang deals with the different country/language issues.

You can learn more by watching this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ce9jv91beQ>



10. CONTENT MARKETING AND LINK EARNING

By now, you have:

A defined Domain/URL strategy

Translated and Localized Content

Geotargeting set up through Webmaster Tools and Hreflang tags/sitemaps

Now that we're all dressed up, it's time to head to the party!

The next step is to start marketing your website internationally.

Whether you are using separate ccTLD's, subdomains or subdirectories, the strategy should be very similar:



1. Content Marketing:

- a.) Create a blog that is regularly update with keyword-centric content
- b.) Add magnetic, link-bait content to earn links and mentions
- c.) Research and feature cultural elements as part of your content strategy
- d.) Produce multi-media and visual content to attract links and social signals, such as infographics, presentations, and videos

2. Outreach for Link Earning:

- a.) Use your content assets to reach out to other bloggers and journalists to promote your content
- b.) Offer to produce co-branded pieces or exclusive pieces for high-value media targets

3. Earn Local Links:

- a.) Break out your Link Earning strategy into silos based on the different targets, and make sure you are earning links at ccTLD/subdomain/subdirectory level. If one of your subdirectories targets /en-ca , make sure you get a few Canadian sites linking to pages that exist within that subdirectory!
- b.) Use local business directories and sites like “BBB” or Chamber of Commerce for different countries. Search for local white/yellow page listings, niche directories, and business databases. Stay consistent with your name, address, and phone number, as you would normally with your local citations!

4. Earn links in the Targeted Language:

- a.) If your target is /fr-ca, which means Canada in French, try to get some links from sites in French!
- b.) Having links from different languages will improve your relevancy in the SERP’s for that language.

5. Competitor Analysis:

- a.) Using tools like moz.com and ahrefs, look at sites ranking well that compete with each of your targeted country/language versions.
- b.) Analyze their backlink profiles and use them as a starting base to get similar links
- c.) Make sure the links you are pursuing are healthy and won’t lead to Penguin penalties!

6. Promote your content via Social Media and Paid Amplification:

- a.) Use social media to identify favorite topics for your target location/language. You can use tools like Buzzsumo, Followerwonk and Topsy.
- b.) Share your content on social media to attract mentions and links
- c.) Amplify your content via paid media using Facebook Ads and others
- d.) Reach out to influencers and convince them to promote your content

International marketing, at its foundation, is not different from the type of marketing you're accustomed to performing for your current website. It simply requires a few modifications to localize it based on your target language/country. Fortunately, Google's ccTLD's are generally less competitive than Google.com, so the barrier to entry in terms of unique referring domains is lower, making the rewards of your efforts easier to achieve.



11. TRACKING YOUR INTERNATIONAL MARKETING EFFORTS

At the very beginning you should've created a list of Goals and KPI's. It's important to have adequate tracking processes for these goals.



To begin, let's talk about tracking your international marketing efforts using Google Analytics.

Tracking ccTLD's

If you are using multiple ccTLD's, tracking will be easy - you can simply use a different Google Analytics code for each domain. You can then create a KPI report that tracks elements like traffic, inbound links, conversions, sales - and then compare each ccTLD to each other. Compare investment into each ccTLD and you can easily determine your most profitable ventures.

Tracking Subdomains

Like ccTLD's, when using subdomains you can use separate analytics code and treat each subdomain as a completely separate website.

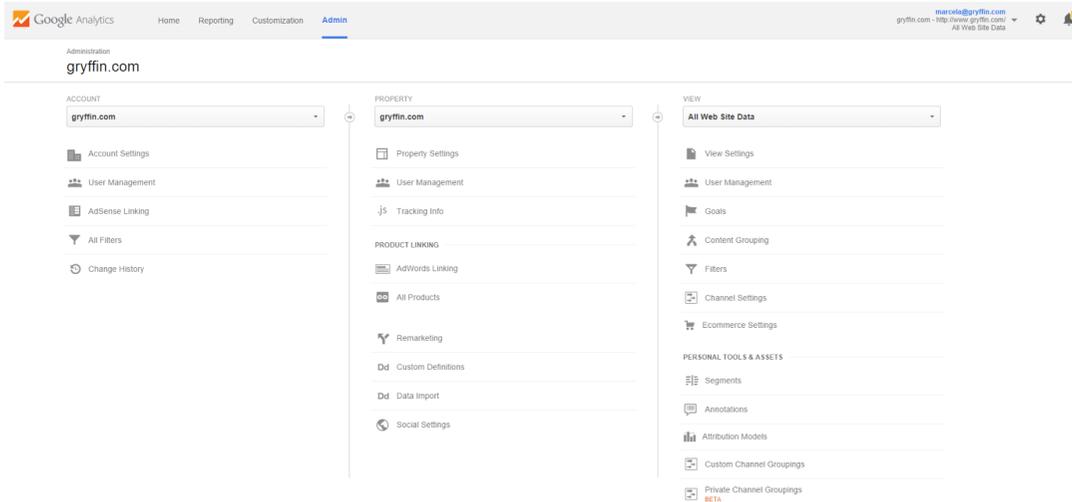
Tracking Subdirectories

As with ccTLD's and Subdomains, you could technically use different analytics code for each of your subdirectories. However, to improve consistency in tracking, consider using the same analytics code but using different filtered views for each subdomain.

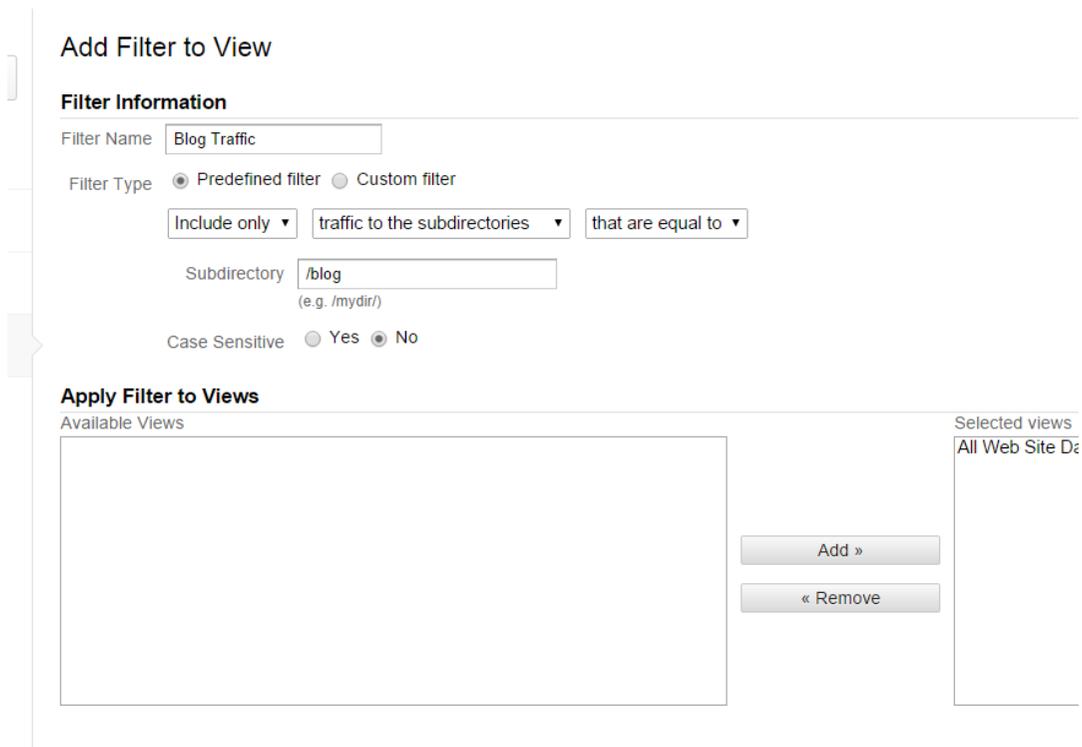
When you log into your analytics, you would then get the option to see an "ALL TRAFFIC" view, which would give you an overview of everything.

You can then choose your different subdirectories to see how each is performing.

To create filters for your subdirectories:
Go to Admin > All Filters > click on "New Filter"



Then, enter the name of the filter, select “Include only” “Traffic to the subdirectories” “that are equal to” an add the relevant subdirectory that you want to track:



Save your filter, and voila! Rinse, lather, repeat for your other countries/languages, and you’ll have create separate views for each of your subdirectories.

Track Conversions Separately

An advantage of filtered views is that you can have specific conversion goals tracked at the subdirectory level. So if you have a leads acquisition conversion goal that is based on when people submit a lead form, you can know how many of those conversions happened within that specific subdirectory.

Tracking Rankings

If you'd like to track keywords ranking, you'll have to use a tool that will allow you to track the different search engines and Google ccTLD's. Advancedwebranking.com is such a tool. You'd have to create a separate profile for each of the subdirectories/ccTLD's/subdomains, but this will allow you to set your source country/IP in order to track where your domain is ranking for that particular target.

Tracking Conclusion

Using Google Analytics, conversion figures, and rankings should allow you to examine cost / campaign and ROI to determine if your international marketing efforts are yielding the expected results.

If you notice that certain geographic locations are simply not moving, you may consider shutting those down if the cost is too great. Watch your ROI closely so you can continuously adjust your strategy.



12. Best Practices: Do's and Don'ts of International SEO

Now that you have a clear overview of the process, let's reinforce some points to have a clear set of best practices:

DO'S AND DON'TS OF INTERNATIONAL SEO	
DO	DO NOT
	
1. Use UTF-8 encoding	1. Use IP Detection and Automatic Redirects
2. Create Shareable URL's	2. Place Language or country in a URL Parameter
3. Don't mix Languages on a URL	3. Use Side-by-Side translations
4. Perform Local Keyword Research	4. Use Automated Translations
3. Use Geographically-Focused External Links	5. Use Rel=Canonical with Hreflang
4. Factor in Page Speed	

DO NOT:

- **Use IP Detection and Automatic Redirects:** Users don't like it, and it creates problems for Googlebot. Dynamically serving different languages on one URL will allow only one language version to be indexed
- **Place Language or country in a URL Parameter:** these are considered less reliable signals.
- **Use Side-by-Side translations:** These prevent Google from knowing what language your page should rank for
- **Use Automated Translations:** If you feel that are helpful for users, be sure to block them from indexing using a "noindex" robots meta tag. Allowing these to be crawled is a violation of Google's Webmaster guidelines.
- **Use Rel=Canonical with Hreflang:** Google doesn't recommend using these together across multiple languages or country versions, but it's okay to use them within the same language/country version.

DO:

- **Use UTF-8 encoding:** this should be in the path, filenames or URL parameters, which will be particularly beneficial with non-ASCII characters.
- **Create Shareable URL's:** Make sure your platform rewrites dynamic URL's so you can create shareable URL's.

- **Don't mix Languages on a URL:** If your page is a Spanish translation, make sure EVERY ASPECT of this page is completely in Spanish. Some sites use side-by-side translations, but this creates confusion for Google.
- **Perform Local Keyword Research:** Don't just perform literal translations. Understand the cultural and nuances of the target country/language.
- **Use Geographically-Focused External Links:** Don't just link to general authorities...when creating content, try to find relevant content in the same language or geographic target to link OUT to.
- **Factor in Page Speed:** If you have a domain/subdirectory targeting China but the site is hosted in Argentina, the load speed may be slow, resulting in suppressed rankings and poor usability. Routinely check your load speed and optimize your hosting by using a CDN if necessary.

GO FORTH AND INTERNATIONALIZE!

You now have all of the elements necessary to create an international marketing strategy. It can seem a daunting prospect. Those armed with the right strategy and perseverance will blaze the pathway to lucrative rewards. We've give you a roadmap to success - now all you have to do is mobilize and strategize. Good luck as you go forth and conquer this new world with shrinking borders!



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