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Web Globalization Effort Growing

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Despite being referred to as the World Wide Web from its inception, it wasn't until relatively recently that the Internet reached true globalization. Byte Level Research's recently published 2005 Web Globalization Report Card, an analysis of 200 Web sites, only emphasizes the rapidity with which the Web has gone international.

Competition drives expansion

John Yunker, president of Byte Level Research (<http://www.bytelevel.com>), says that Web globalization can be attributed primarily to US companies needing non-US revenues to continue growing.

"Companies now need international revenues to meet their numbers, not just add to their numbers," Yunker says. "With emerging markets increasingly embracing the Internet, Web globalization becomes a necessity, not a luxury."

Yunker says that non-US revenue growth continues to outpace domestic growth across the majority of Fortune 100 companies. Add to that the industry's growth in countries such as China, India, and Russia, and you have what Yunker refers to as a Web globalization explosion.

"By 2006, more than half of [Amazon.com's] revenues will be non-US revenues," he says. "Intel already derives 70 percent of its revenues from outside the US; Google

derives 25 percent."

For the second year in a row, the study named Google the best global Web site.

"While [other sites] dipped their toes in the Web globalization waters, Google dived right in from the onset," says Yunker. "And I think they'll be tough to beat if [the company] continues adding new languages and functionality."

Yunker adds that other "best of breed" sites that have heavily invested over the years in Web globalization (American Express, Hewlett-Packard, and IBM, for example) also deserve mention.

Martin Dürst, lead of the World Wide Web Consortium's Internationalization Activity (www.w3c.org/International), says Byte Level's findings demonstrate increased interest in globalization, which he hopes will translate into more and better globalized sites. "But there are many different criteria to evaluate global Web sites," he says.

"As far as I can tell, the report concentrates on global structure, in particular how to access different localized Web sites from each other via a so-called 'Global Gateway,'" Dürst says. "The quality of each localized version of the Web site is more difficult to evaluate, but is ultimately the most important factor for success."

Global RSS

One site hoping to make its mark in the international online arena is Bloglines (www.bloglines.com). The company, which debuted its internationalized Bloglines in December 2004, is the brainchild of Mark Fletcher, formerly of Onelist (now Yahoo Groups).

"The days of the single-language Web site are over, unless the company wants to be exclusively a local player," Fletcher says. "We designed Bloglines from the ground up to be capable of supporting multiple languages."

One of Bloglines' core elements is its internationalized RSS service.

"[RSS] enables me to follow roughly three times as many news sources, from classic

media outlets to Web logs," says Bloglines user Helge Fahrnberger, a product development consultant in Vienna. "It completely changed the way I consume news and surf the Web."

Fahrnberger says the entry threshold to RSS is its biggest challenge.

"You might continue to consume news the way you always did, maybe wondering about those little RSS icons from time to time, until someone 'forces' you to try RSS," says Fahrnberger. "A week later you will wonder how you ever managed without it."

Richard Ishida, of the W3C Internationalization Activity, says that although the different versions of RSS formats are numerous, none have been through any kind of rigorous standardization process.

"One working group is now working on consolidating the advances made in [RSS] over the past few years," Ishida says. "The W3C is watching this development and occasionally contributing."

Web globalization's future

Another development the W3C is watching is the functionality supporting multilingual Web addresses.

"With the adoption of the standards relating to international domain names, we are now much closer to realizing that goal [multilingual Web addresses]," Ishida says. "The deployment of new technologies will further expand the use of the Web in areas using languages such as Arabic and Chinese."

Yunker agrees. "There is no such thing as a 'foreign market' anymore," he says. "If an executive assumes—as some do—that the world should conduct business in English or shop in English, that company is going to be a Web globalization laggard."

Yunker says companies need to view themselves as global companies serving local customers rather than US companies serving foreign customers. He predicts that localized Web sites are going to get even more local.

"Right now a company is happy if it has a Chinese Web site in place," Yunker says. "In a

few years we could see a Chinese Web site with localized province sites also available. It naturally depends on the company and industry, but I think that we will see Web localization evolve into Web personalization."

Ishida says that although universal Web access has always been considered important, letting people access the Web using their own language and script is also important.

"Virtually every Web site should be accessible, and this can usually be achieved rather easily," he says "On the other hand, making a Web site available in a significant number of languages requires a huge resource commitment. Unfortunately, many Web site producers still think that this will be taken care of by the Internationalization Activity at the W3C or their localization vendor. It is, however, essential to apply internationalization techniques during the design and development phases if international users are to be supported well and efficiently.

"We want much of this work to be driven by the needs of the community so we encourage designers and developers to let us know if there are areas of practical advice they would like us to address on their behalf."

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