Using the Internet for International Marketing: Web Site Design Issues for UK SMEs Competing in Foreign Markets

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Abstract

> The internet presents businesses with an unprecedented opportunity for penetrating global markets, and increasingly UK firms are seeking to take advantage of that opportunity by launching web sites to promote their products and services. Coupled with this proliferation of commercial web sites, principles for good practice in web site design have been advanced, and the adoption of some of them investigated through empirical studies. Given the global reach of the internet, surprisingly few studies focus on the design of international web sites. The present study represents an effort to redress the balance by exploring the extent to which UK SMEs are using the web for international marketing, and considering how the design of their web sites might enhance or inhibit their global marketing efforts. The findings suggest that few organizations are following recommended practice in international web site design. Some observations are made about this low uptake of good practice, and some potential business implications discussed.

Keywords: internet; web site design; Small and Medium-sized Enterprise; international marketing; e-commerce

Introduction

Arguably for many businesses, one of the most attractive aspects of the world wide web is its broad reach, providing an unprecedented low-cost opportunity for them to penetrate global markets (Aldridge, Forcht and Pierson 1997:161; Herbig and Hale 1997:98; Kiani 1998:185). However, as an increasing number of businesses compete for the attention and custom of web site visitors, there is a growing realization that it is not sufficient simply to 'have a presence' on the internet (Day 1997:111; Economist 1998), but rather it is now argued that the key to successful internet marketing is to create and maintain well-designed web sites that are tailored to the needs of site visitors (Wan 2000:15; Lazar 2001:30)

This increasing emphasis on the need for well-designed sites has led to the emergence of a growing body of literature in which discussions are presented regarding what constitutes good practice in web site design. Some aspects of this good practice have been investigated through empirical studies. However, given the global reach of the internet, there are surprisingly few studies concentrating on the design of international web sites, or the adoption of recommended practice in the creation of such sites. This study represents an attempt to complement existing work by exploring, first the extent to which UK businesses are using the web to compete in foreign markets, and second considering how the design of their web sites might enhance or inhibit those global marketing efforts.

This study is focussed on SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) in the UK manufacturing sector. Justification for the focus on small businesses is found in the widespread reports that small businesses are extensively exploiting the internet because it represents for them a unique tool that enables them to compete globally with small and large organizations alike (Kiani 1998:188; Haynes, Becherer and Helms 1998:230). Furthermore, the manufacturing sector has been selected for study since this sector is reportedly making considerable use of the low-cost marketing opportunities presented by the advent of the internet, and beginning to explore its sales potential by circumventing traditional retailers and distribution channels in order to interact directly with clients via the 'shop front' of the company web site (de Kare-Silver 2000:173).

Based on the findings of this study of commercial web sites, some observations are made about UK small businesses and their use of the web, and a discussion presented of some of the potential business implications of not following recommended practice in international web site design.

Before presenting the study itself, some of the literature on recommended practice in web site design is discussed, with a particular emphasis on principles for designing good international web sites.

Background: Good Practice In Web Site Design

Underlying most, if not all, of the criteria formulated to date for successful web site design is an emphasis on viewing the company web site as an 'interface between customers and the company' (Wan 2000:17), and hence on developing sites with the needs of the site visitor in mind (Rohan 1999; Cunliffe 2000:299). Indeed, some authors argue that in order to ensure sites that meet visitor needs, they should be designed in collaboration with potential end users, in much the same way that end users often participate in the design and development of other information systems (Abels, White and Hahn 1998; Lazar 2001). Above all, a web site should be designed in such a way that it both attracts first-time visitors, as well as encourages repeat visits (Day 1997:109). In order to facilitate this, the following areas of good practice in web site design are advanced in the literature:

Site layout and navigation: Much of the discussion on site design has considered the layout of sites, their structures, and the technical features that will appeal to site visitors and enhance their experience of using the web. It is argued, for example, that

it is important to keep the visitor experience 'quick and simple' by minimizing the 'paths to the completion of a transaction or enquiry' (Computer Bulletin 2000), ensuring, through the avoidance of 'innovation overload' that download times are as short as possible (Day 1997:113). Moreover, web content should be presented in such a way that required information can be found effortlessly by the site visitor (Economist 1998; Rohan 1999). Sites should be easy to navigate (Aldridge, Forcht and Pierson 1997:168; Wan 2000:16), and should not be cluttered with excessive amounts of information (Herbig and Hale 1997:97).

Site objectives: With regard to web content, organizations should determine the objectives, or mission, of their web site (Simeon 1999:300; Lazar 2001:26) and communicate these objectives clearly to the site visitor. When visiting a site, the visitor should know what the site is for: its purposes should be clearly articulated (Day 1997:111). Typical web site objectives might be: to market products or services, to sell goods or services, to inform site visitors, or to entertain visitors (Lazar 2001:27).

Target audience: Abels, White and Hahn (1998:46) have pointed out that, as the number of web users has increased, so the interests and information needs of site visitors has diversified, with the result that it is now necessary to consider designing resources that match the specific needs of each of the user communities. To this end, it is important, not only to formulate the mission of a web site, but to identify also its target audience (Day 1997; de Kare-Silver 2000:214; Lazar 2001:26). In other words, organizations should not simply assume that because the web has the potential for reaching everyone, all sites will be relevant to everyone (Day 1997:111). In practice,

any given site is likely to be intended only for a sub-group of people. Targets might include: a particular age group, a gender grouping, language groupings, geographical locations, cultures, and so on (Herbig and Hale 1997:98; Cole and O'Keefe 2000:4; Simeon 1999:297). Parallels are drawn here with more conventional marketing strategies, in which a key to success is perceived to be knowing who the customers are in your marketplace (Herbig and Hale 1997:98; Goldstein 1998:364). For web design purposes, this target audience should, as with the site objectives, be clearly articulated on the site so that when visitors access it, they know whether or not it is going to be relevant for them (Day 1997:111).

With regard to site targeting, one key decision a business must make is whether their site is to be simply for domestic visitors or for international visitors (Lazar 2001). If the target visitors are international, then, in addition to targeting the site explicitly, there are two further issues for the web designer to consider:

- ✍ First, in providing facilities for site visitors to communicate with the business, 'country specific elements' should be included on the site (Esselink 2000:29) to facilitate ease of use. Such include, for example, international dialling codes for telephone and fax numbers.

- ✍ Second, businesses should give some consideration to the language (or languages) used by their site visitors. There has tended to be a tacit assumption by many organizations that the language of the internet is English, and yet, as a number of authors highlight, the number of non-English speaking web users is rising fast (Perkin 2001; Ries and Ries 2000:102) and is likely to continue to rise (Sprung

2000). Again parallels are drawn here with traditional business practice (Perkin 2001), in which it is often argued that the most effective way to do business is to speak the language of your customer (see for example Webber 1997). Similarly, a key to success in internet marketing is the development of 'effective cross-border' strategies, amongst which is included the presentation of web content in the language (or languages) of the site visitors (Simeon 1999:305).

Site visit monitoring: Whilst mindful of some of the technical and accuracy problems associated with web site 'hit counters' (Berthon, Pitt and Prendergast 1997), such tools provide a market research facility, albeit crude, for an organization to assess interest in its site and to monitor site activity (Cunliffe 2000:301). Similarly, site feedback questionnaires allow organizations to see if their site is being accessed by the intended target audience. The inclusion of such facilities on a site can arguably be interpreted as evidence of the organization's commitment to creating a targeted site.

This brief overview of the literature has served to highlight some of the principal issues currently being discussed in relation to good practice in web site design. Empirical studies have been undertaken to explore the adoption of good practice in relation to site layouts, and navigational aspects (see for example Simeon 1999; Bell and Tang 1998; Katz and Aspden 1997; Abels, White and Hahn 1997). Further studies have been conducted to examine site objectives and the type of web content being presented by various types of organizations (see Lazar 2001 for a summary of some of these). One gap noted in the literature is that little emphasis has been placed on empirical investigations into the targeting of web sites to specific types of site visitor. In particular, there has been little exploration of the adoption of recommended

practice for the targeting of sites to an international audience. The present study has been carried out in an effort to fill this gap, and complement existing studies on site design issues. Its key objectives are:

- ✍ To determine the uptake of international web sites by small UK manufacturing businesses;
- ✍ To investigate the extent to which recommended practice in international web site is being followed by those businesses.

In the light of recent research findings suggesting that SMEs are not yet reaping the benefits of their investments in internet technology (see for example Doherty, Hughes and Ellis-Chadwick forthcoming; Daniel 2001), it is envisaged that, in addressing these two objectives, the research presented in this study will make a contribution to the currently important area of assisting SMEs in their exploitation of the business potential of the internet.

Research Method

In view of the apparent dearth of empirical research regarding international web site design, it seemed reasonable to embark on an exploratory study. Given the ease of public access to commercial web sites, a justifiable approach to the exploratory study seemed to be to conduct an online review of web sites. This review was designed to provide an overview of the information presented, and the facilities offered, on each site, as well as some details of the design of each site.

In line with recommendations in the literature of research methodology (see for example Miles and Huberman 1994), it is anticipated that this initial exploratory study will subsequently be extended to incorporate in-depth interviews and discussions with the management of UK small businesses regarding the design of international web sites, thereby facilitating the capture of qualitative data to supplement the largely quantitative data gathered in the online web site review presented here.

The review of web sites was undertaken during the last quarter of 2000 and the first quarter of 2001. In order to ensure that the process of data collection from each web site was consistent and accurate, a web site analysis form was devised. Precedent for this approach to online data gathering was found in Doherty, Ellis-Chadwick and Hart (1999). In order to validate the research instrument employed, the web site analysis form was pre-tested in a pilot study during which the web sites of ten SMEs were reviewed. As a result of this pilot, some minor refinements were made to the form, and the exploratory study was then conducted.

The sample of web sites for review was taken from the Ukdirectory, which comprised a listing of UK-based organizations and their web sites. The directory contained a section on UK SMEs, divided into a number of categories, including retailing, manufacturing, and marketing organizations. For the purposes of this exploratory study, as outlined earlier, the manufacturing category was selected for review. This category comprised a list of web sites of 2244 manufacturing enterprises organized into 13 sub-categories, including automotive manufacturers, plastics manufacturers and electrical manufacturers. In order to incorporate in the study a representative cross-section of the 13 categories of manufacturing organization, a stratified sample

was selected for the exploratory site review, consisting of the first 10% of sites listed in each category, thus totalling a review of 224 sites. The breakdown of sites according to sub-category in the stratified sample is presented in Table I below.

Table I: Web sites reviewed

SUB-CATEGORY	NO. OF SITES
automotive	8
electrical	14
machinery	39
metal	29
rubber	5
wood	10
chemical	14
electronics	33
glass	5
medical	10
plastic	15
textiles	12
general	30
TOTAL	*224*

The web site analysis form was designed to capture the following data:

? First background data about each site, including the site address, and the types of web content presented on the site (e.g. company profile, details of products and/or services offered by the organization, an electronic contact facility such as e-mail or an online form, and electronic commerce facilities for online purchasing).

? Second, sites were examined to determine if they contained a hit counter (visitor counter) and/or site feedback questionnaire.

? Third, in an effort to determine the extent to which recommended practice in international web site design was being followed, data was captured about the target audience of each site (domestic or international). Furthermore, the

international site design features on each site were noted. Specifically, the language (or range of languages) used to present the web content were recorded, and the presence or absence of country specific elements was noted, such as international telephone and fax dialling codes.

Findings Of The Web Site Review

The exploratory review of web sites has produced some interesting results, particularly with regard to the low level of adoption of recommended practice in designing targeted web sites. In presenting the results of the review, first an overview is provided of the types of web content employed on the sites in the sample.

Web content types: The findings indicate that the overwhelming majority of organizations are using their web site to communicate information about their organization (92%). A slightly higher proportion use the site to promote the products and/or services offered by the organization (99.6%). Most sites (95.1%) included an online enquiry facility (e-mail or an online form) for communicating with the organization electronically. Whilst only a very small minority of organizations (4.9%) were offering online purchasing facilities, it was noted that many businesses included on their site a dedicated sales e-mail address or sales phone line. These findings are summarized in Table II below.

Table II: Overview of web site content types

CONTENT TYPE	NO. OF SITES (%)
Information about products/services	**223** (99.6)%
Enquiry service (e-mail/online form)	**213** (95.1%)
Information about organization	**206** (92%)
Online trading facility (e-commerce)	**11** (4.9%)

Site visit monitoring: The findings showed that few organizations were monitoring site visits: only 25 (11%) of the 224 sites included a hit counter and 16 (7%) contained a feedback questionnaire. Only four sites in the sample had both a hit counter and a feedback questionnaire.

Target site visitors: With regard to the target audience of each site, only two (0.9%) out of the sample of 224 sites contained an explicit statement at the top of the home page indicating the site's target audience: in one case the site was intended for UK visitors only (domestic), and in the other case for an international audience (UK and overseas visitors). A more detailed analysis of the content presented on the sites in the sample revealed that on a further 21 sites (9.4%), it was claimed that the target audience was domestic only. On a further 72 sites (32%), an indication was given somewhere on the site that the target audience was international. Typically, this information was located in a description of the company's history and current profile, rather than on the home page. From the web content of the remaining 129 sites (57.6%), it did not seem to be possible to determine whether the sites were intended for domestic or international site visitors. These findings are summarized in Figure 1 below.
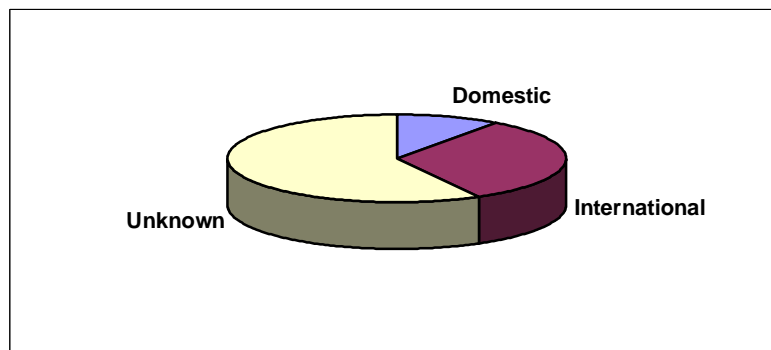
Figure 1: Target site visitors

Country specific elements: All but one of the organizations included contact details (telephone, fax, and/or address) on their site to allow visitors to communicate with them. Looking specifically at the sites with an international target audience, it was noted that of the 73 sites claiming to be international, a high proportion included country specific elements.   For example, 52 (71%) included the international telephone dialling code, and 51 (70%) included the international fax code.

Language of web content: The findings of the web site review revealed that little use was being made of multilingual web sites. Despite many of the organizations claiming clients in a variety of non-English speaking countries, of the 73 international sites, seven (10%) were available in European languages other than English. None of the organizations presented web content in non-European languages. Table III below summarizes the European languages used on the seven multilingual sites, and shows that all of the multilingual sites presented web content in French, with German and then Spanish being the next two most popular languages respectively. This table also shows that most of the multilingual sites included web content in three or four languages other than English.

Table III: Summary of multilingual web sites

SITE	LANGUAGE				
	French	**German**	**Spanish**	**Italian**	**Dutch**
1	✓	✓	✓		
2	✓	✓	✓		
3	✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	✓	✓		✓	
5	✓	✓			✓
6	✓		✓		
7	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Further analysis of the sites in the sample revealed that only four out of the total 224 sites followed all aspects of good practice for international site design, i.e. only four sites were targeted at an international audience, included the use of relevant country specific elements, and presented multilingual web content. Only one of these sites contained site visit monitoring features (a hit counter and also a site feedback questionnaire).

Discussion Of Findings

The results of the exploratory study indicated that the SMEs in the sample were typically using the company web site as a marketing tool, rather than for online sales purposes. The findings further suggested that these web marketing efforts generally did not seem to be well-focussed: notably, when accessing the majority of sites in the sample, a site visitor would be unlikely to be able to determine whether they were intended for a domestic or international audience. Overall, the results showed a low level of adoption of recommended practice in international web site design.

These findings raise questions which cannot be answered by the online web site review alone, and consequently a further study is planned to investigate more fully issues associated with international web site design. Such a study would, moreover, serve to address the recognized limitations and bias of this exploratory study, these

being notably that first the study has been confined to a "snapshot" of the web sites of SMEs from one industry sector who have selected to advertise their web presence in a particular directory at a given point in time, and second that no account has been taken of the web and non-web marketing strategies of those SMES, or the resources available to them. However, whilst acknowledging these limitations and bias, some observations can be made based on the findings of the preliminary research presented here:

Maximizing the potential of the web: A number of authors have reported that many commercial organizations do not seem to be maximizing the potential of the web for marketing and sales purposes (Economist 1998; De Kare-Silver 2000). This seems to be the case particularly for SMEs (Daniel 2001). Some businesses are claiming, for instance, that they are not seeing a good return on their investment in web technology and that sales are not really increasing as a result. The dearth of well-targeted web sites which this study has highlighted could arguably be an underlying cause of this disappointment in the internet as a marketing medium. There is clearly a need for SMEs to think about the target audience of their web site and then to ensure that the design of the site appropriately targets that audience.

Theory and practice: This study has shown that recommended practice in web site design, particularly international web site design, has not yet permeated actual practice to any great extent. This is perhaps not surprising: as Day (1997) has pointed out 'it is a new area and many people are simply finding their way for the first time'. Moreover, 'those who are at the forefront of the web, the design technologists, are not typically inclined to sit back, reflect on their practice, neither are they likely to 'source

relevant theory'. Some education of practitioners would, nonetheless, seem to be necessary with regard to designing visitor-focussed web sites. Perhaps what is required at this juncture in the web's development, is a concerted effort on the part of those formulating design theory to ensure that relevant aspects of good practice are clearly communicated to the web practitioner world by dissemination through trade-oriented publications and other relevant communication channels, rather than simply through the forum of more scholarly journals.

Marketing strategies and web marketing: The low emphasis on targeting and of site visit monitoring identified among many of the web sites reviewed in this study, seems to run counter to current approaches to more conventional marketing efforts. The advent of database marketing has meant that businesses have tended to move away from mass marketing to highly-focussed marketing based on a detailed knowledge of existing customers and a clear profile of potential customers that the organization would like to attract (Reid 1996). This apparent mismatch between conventional marketing strategies and web marketing strategies is perhaps indicative of a more fundamental problem, namely that businesses are not truly aligning their web marketing strategy with their existing marketing strategy, or perhaps not even aligning their use of the web with their existing business strategy and objectives. It would seem that a greater emphasis on alignment of these areas is required in order that the potential of the web as an effective marketing tool can be more fully realized.

Furthermore, the low emphasis on visit monitoring and site targeting seems incongruous with the nature of the web as an interactive and individualized marketing tool: the world wide web arguably offers an organization an unrivalled opportunity for

interaction with customers and potential customers, for discovering who is showing an interest in the organization, and for communicating with specific types of customer or potential customer. From the findings of this study, it would seem that organizations are in danger of missing this focussed marketing opportunity by using the web instead simply as a mass marketing tool (Herbig and Hale 1997; Kiani 1998).

The implications of not designing a targeted web site would seem to be: first, that site visitors will become frustrated by the site on their initial visit to it, not knowing whether it is relevant to their needs, and hence will not feel inclined to return to it, turning instead to a competitor. Second, the business may be burdened with irrelevant enquiries from site visitors. For example, if the site is only intended for a domestic audience, then enquiries or orders from overseas site visitors will waste the time of staff in the organization, ultimately resulting in loss of revenue. This issue is likely to be particularly significant for small businesses since they will not generally have the capacity to cope with a high volume of responses to their web site.

Language and business: The low number of SMEs presenting web content multilingually is an unsurprising result of this study: UK businesses, especially SMEs, have a long track record of relying solely on English for their communication needs (Hagen 1988; Webber 1997) and typically lack in-house language resources. However, studies have shown that this may be to the detriment of UK SMEs, and whilst it may be difficult to prove conclusively that communicating in the language of your customer will improve your business performance, there is a substantial body of anecdotal evidence to suggest it is likely to give your organization competitive advantage (Webber 1997) and hence the hiring of external resources for language and

translation purposes is likely to represent a worthwhile investment for the marketing and sales activities of an SME generally, and perhaps specifically for the multilingual presentation of its web content.

It is worth noting, whilst automated translation systems do exist for translating web pages, they are typically still in their infancy, and the quality of their output is somewhat dubious (Watters and Patel 153). Until such time as high quality web-based machine translation systems exist, it would seem that UK businesses would be advised, in order to gain competitive advantage, to consider incorporating into their web design strategy, the production of web content in the language(s) of their customers. This is particularly important given, as noted earlier, the growing numbers of non-English speaking web users.

Arguably, there is a strategic role to be played here by bodies such as the DTI, Chamber of Commerce and Business Link first in promoting, among SMEs, recommended practice in international web site design and second in raising awareness among SMEs of relevant language resources to assist in the creation of multilingual web sites, notably translation services, and language and cultural consultants.

Conclusions

This study has found, among the UK manufacturing organizations, a low level of adoption of recommended practice in web site design, especially with regard to targeting web sites to international visitors. Some observations have been made about this low uptake of good practice, and its possible negative impact on business efforts. It has been suggested in the study that UK businesses need to examine their web

marketing efforts and view them as a strategic part of their overall marketing activity, paying particular attention to the types of visitor they are wanting to attract to their sites and the specific needs of those visitors, including linguistic needs.

The specific value of this exploratory study has been to highlight some areas of recommended practice in international web site design that UK SMEs typically do not seem to be following, and to suggest how SMEs might derive commercial benefit from following this recommended practice. In doing so, the research contributes to the wider body of research seeking to develop strategies for increasing SMEs' successful exploitation of the internet for marketing and sales purposes.

The study provides a useful framework and foundation for further investigation in the area of designing effective international web sites. The intention now is to build on this study by conducting a more in-depth investigation of UK manufacturing SMEs, by means of questionnaire surveys and interviews, in an endeavour to canvass views of the senior management of such organizations regarding their web site strategies and their level of awareness of the good practice guidelines on web site design.

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