

Roadmaps for Effective International Communications



Using the Roadmaps

“Would you tell me, please, [said Alice] which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

—Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

Before you embark on your international communications journey, you ought to figure out where you’re going — and why. The questions in “International Business Profile” on page 46 and “International Communications Strategy and Plan” on page 47 will help point you in the right direction.

And as you write and implement your international communications plan, “International Communications Checklist” on page 48 will help to guide you.

International Business Profile

Business Objectives

- What business are you in?
- In what geographies outside North America are you operating (or do you plan to operate)?
- What are your international business objectives?
- Do you have a solid footing in the new geographies, or is this your first foray outside North America?
- Are you selling or manufacturing abroad — or both?
- What product or products are you selling?

Marketing Objectives

- Who is your target audience?
- As users of your product, how “sophisticated” are they?
- How “sophisticated” are they, from an English-language perspective?
- Are you entering a highly competitive market or do you have a niche product?
- Will you be selling directly or through channels?
- Will you be participating in international trade shows?

Product Objectives

- Is your product a mass market item, or is it for a specialized audience?
- How much “communication” is required to use it?
- If it is a high-technology product, is it hardware or software?

Current Communications Components

- Through what medium do you advertise?
- Do you distribute product fact sheets?
- Do you produce a newsletter for customers or partner companies?
- What kind of user documentation do you provide?
- Do you include online help with your product?
- Do you have a website? How is it used?

- Are there other communications components that should be considered in your strategy (e.g., memos, presentations, and business correspondence). If so, what are they?

International Communications Strategy and Plan

The strategy and plan you write after you answer the questions in “International Business Profile” depend on these two key communications objectives:

- **Effectiveness objective:** How important is quality to the success of this effort?
- **Efficiency objective:** What are your time and budget objectives and restrictions?

International Culture and Communications Profile

- How “different” is your target customers’ culture and native language from your own?
- Does your target audience speak English? If so, are they completely fluent? Is it their first language, second language, or are they occasional users of English?
- Will they be comfortable dealing with your product in English? If there is some level of comfort, does it extend to all aspects of the product?
- Which categories of your current communications components do you plan to modify for your international audience? For each category, state your motivation and objective for the modification.
- How accessible is the Internet to them? Is the Internet available to your entire target audience? Do they have usage restrictions? What level of technology do they have available to them?
- How “sophisticated” are they at getting information via the Internet and interacting with Internet applications?
- Will your international customers and partners use your website? How?

Efficiency (Time and Cost) Restrictions

- What is your budget for *globalizing* (also called *internationalizing*) or *localizing* your product?
- Do you have control of the budget? How it is allocated?

- Is all of your budget devoted to deliverables? Can some of it be used for training and other intangibles?
- What high-priority projects and near-term deadlines do you face?

Available Resources

- How “internationally savvy” is your staff? Have they had prior experience in producing products and information components for an international audience?
- Do you have in-house resources available to create an international communications strategy?
- Do you have in-house resources available to implement the strategy?
- If you need consulting resources to create the strategy or implement the plan, do you have an existing relationship or contract with a consultant or an agency?
- If you will be doing translation, will you be using in-house resources or outsourcing the work? If outsourcing, do you have an existing relationship or contract with a consultant or an agency?

Planning and Implementing

Your target audience will reward you for a good strategy/plan and penalize you for a poor one. The following checklist will help you understand the rewards and the penalties, and give you a roadmap for implementing your international communications projects.

International Communications Checklist



Category 1: Good advice to follow no matter who the audience is.

Example: Include a glossary of technical terms used in the product documentation.

Reward: High-quality material that is clear, concise, and consistent.

Penalty 1: Poor-quality material that causes confusion and misunderstanding.

Penalty 2: If your competitors have products of equal capability that are easier to use, your customers will desert you.

Checklist:

- Use consistent terminology throughout the material.
- Include a glossary of technical terms. Provide examples to go along with the definitions of terms.
- Avoid jargon.
- Avoid idioms, slang, and too much “cuteness.”

This is a good rule for both technical and marketing material. However, a certain level of “cuteness” is what often makes marketing material, especially advertising, effective.

- Follow a policy of “one concept, one word.”
- Keep sentences short and simple.

Dependent clauses cause particular problems for non-native English speakers.

- Use active voice wherever possible.
- Use a simple vocabulary and conventional syntax.
- Use bullets to break up longer thoughts.
- Avoid colors that are difficult to read (e.g., red or green).
- Use graphics wherever “a picture will equal a thousand words.” However, take care to avoid appearing “junky.”

Here are some guidelines for effective graphics use (adapted from Rew 1993):

- Use one figure or table to illustrate each concept; do not try to incorporate several concepts in the same graphic.
 - Do not superimpose callouts (word identifications or parts of graphics) on the graphic itself. Leave plenty of white space around the graphic to allow for text expansion.
 - Use action graphics: arrows showing direction or people in action poses.
- Use a modular design that “chunks” material in sections of no more than a few paragraphs each.

- Avoid icons that are not immediately obvious (and don't assume what's obvious to you is obvious to other people).

Category 2: Don't upset their sensibilities.

Example: When McDonald's reprinted sacred words from the Koran on 2 million paper bags and 270 million cans (as part of its 1994 Olympics advertising campaign), Muslims worldwide boycotted their products.

Penalty: Your customers may not forgive you — ever.

Checklist:

- Check pictures or icons that use hand gestures with someone who understands your target culture. What might seem innocuous to you might be extremely offensive to someone from another culture.
- Avoid colors that have emotionally-charged meanings for some cultures.
- Avoid using pictures or symbols that are meaningful only in a narrow cultural or geographic context (e.g., cowboy, dollar sign, reference to “the Bay Area” or “the Twin Cities.”)
- Avoid anything that might offend people's deeply-held values.
This implies that you need to take the time to find out what their deeply-held values are.

Category 3: Don't insult their pocketbooks.

Example: General Motors kept the Nova name on an automobile when the began selling it in Mexico; they didn't realize it meant “it doesn't go” or “it doesn't run” in Spanish.

Penalty: Your customers will buy from your competitors.

Checklist:

- Use translators who are native speakers of the target language. If you have to cut corners, at least have native speakers review the translations before they get published.
- Have at least one person currently (or very recently) living in the target country review your material.

Question: Why are Examples 1 and 2 somewhat charming and Example 3 bothersome?

Example 1 (from a Tokyo Hotel): “Is forbidden to steal hotel towels please. If you are not a person to do such a thing please not to read notis.”

Example 2 (on the menu of a Swiss restaurant): “Our wines leave you nothing to hope for.”

Example 3 (in a computer hardware manual): “To clear CMOS setup memory, if there has been any inappropriate operation incurring the system is failure. !!NOTE!! Each Bank can be installed and worked individually, the mainboard provide optimal performance and freely choices depended on your needed.”

Answer: Because we paid good money for that piece of hardware, and we expect to get documentation we can understand!

Category 4: Acknowledge their uniqueness.

Example: Translate your material into your customers’ native language.

Business Advantage: You’ll earn their business and their loyalty.

Checklist:

- Do a communications needs assessment with your target audience.
- Do a target audience usability test or focus group session.
- Internationalize your material, even though you don’t plan to localize it.
 - Reference countries or cities outside North America
 - Include both miles and kilometers for distance measurements.
 - Avoid references to seasons that would imply weather patterns in the Northern Hemisphere.
 - Avoid references to holidays that are unique to the U.S., Western culture, or the Christian religion. Or, include in a North American-centric list some items that recognize other cultures.
 - Avoid references to a work week of Monday through Friday.

- Avoid showing or referencing stereotyped gender roles.
- Include pictures or symbols that are meaningful in a wider context than your own (e.g., show not one, but several groups: some men only, some men and women, and some ethnically diverse in appearance and dress).
- Use graphics that an international audience can understand. For example, a power plug and receptacle should be generic, not detailed enough to look like any particular type.
- Consider paper size for all target audiences.

North American paper size is 8-1/2 x 11 inches, but in Europe it's A4: 8.25 x 11.75 inches. In addition, Europeans punch two holes instead of three for binder insertion.
- To avoid expensive rework, be aware of local “green laws” that might affect printing, packaging, and binding.
- Localize for specific target audiences, for example:
 - Format of numbers, especially the decimal point and thousands separator (1,000,000.00 vs. 1.000.000,00)
 - Format of dates and time (4:30 p.m. vs. 1630, 3/31/97 vs. 31.03.97)
 - Format of addresses and phone numbers
 - Format of amounts of money (\$123.45 in the U.S. vs. 123\$45 in Portugal)
 - Units of measurement
 - Order of family and given name and forms of polite address
 - Names for generic person (John Doe vs. Pierre Dupont)
- Translate for all audiences where North American English material will be a hindrance in understanding or using your product.
 - Translate using native speakers familiar with your industry.
 - Review all translated material with someone who is a native speaker of the target language and who is in or close to your organization.

- Include at least 30% white space (both for readability and to allow for translation).
- Rules particularly important for online translation (adapted from Horton 1994):
 - Minimize abbreviations, acronyms, and mnemonics.
 - Leave room for English to expand to twice in height and three times in length when translated.
 - Categories and the uses of categories are culturally determined. Do not depend on a deep understanding of logical constructs.
 - Use a simple vocabulary and conventional syntax. Follow the same conventions that someone studying your language would use first.
 - Use a standard typeface, especially for readers unfamiliar with the Roman alphabet.
 - Avoid prepositions in short phrases. Prepositions are difficult to translate accurately, especially when they appear in short phrases out of context, such as phrases on a menu.
 - Give extra feedback. Provide frequent checks of the user’s knowledge or tests of mastery. Include online glossaries with examples, and if possible, include language-to-language dictionaries.

References

Horton, William. 1994. *Designing and Writing Online Documents* (2nd edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Rew, Lois Johnson. 1993. *Introduction to Technical Writing: Process and Practice* (2nd edition). New York: St. Martin’s Press.

