Cross-Cultural Design: The Web Without Borders

The web has no borders. And yet, most of us have a site audience persona in mind that fits our cultural background when designing websites. We assume that our site visitors come mainly from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, or developed countries. We want to reach a global audience but design with our peers, and sometimes only our own gender, in mind. We treat the web as an extension of our own experiences and leave many potential clients, or donors, scratching their heads. A cross-cultural design approach can help you prevent this. The fact alone that most websites are consumed in English doesn’t necessarily mean that all of your site visitors understand your cultural clues, share your color choices, or find themselves in the images and data you upload. Cross-cultural design
best practices underline that your site can be viewed and understood across cultures and that it speaks to a diverse audience.

Cross-cultural design doesn’t mean to simply translate your website’s content to the language of your localized target audience, but it refers to a clear content-strategy and design approach that makes fundamental changes to the way you present yourself, your business or your organization online to be relevant to a cross-cultural, international audience.

Cross-cultural design refers to your content (tone of voice, symbolism, idiosyncrasies, slang) as well as your design choices (colors, typography, emojis, layout, interface functionalities, visuals).

The more you try to align your content and design to the cultural background, race, gender, ethnicity, age, or religion of your users and their expectations, the more effective your website will be to convert them to clients, customers, or donors. And your site will be more
useful, engaging and credible. You can’t be everything to all your site visitors, however. Find common, neutral ground and, at the very least, try not to offend anyone. That is best done when you focus on human-centered design. Cultures and societal mores shift; you don’t want to be caught in implicit biases, assumptions, and stereotypes. Your site should speak to real people, wherever they are.

That’s easier said than done. Here are a few examples of cross-cultural diversities that could impact your website’s reach:

- **Navigation:** In a cross-cultural study, readers from Taiwan preferred thematically organized online shopping websites, where products were grouped according to their position in the house. Americans expect products in online stores to be grouped according to their use or purpose. Another example: The hamburger menu used in mobile device navigation is commonly recognizable in Western culture — not so much in Asian cultures. In China, for example, a compass icon is commonly used as a navigation menu symbol. And web users in India don’t associate the magnifying glass icon with search.
• **Content:** In Japan, websites with high information density are seen as functional and aesthetic and have, what seems to Western eyes, a much busier layout. In Western cultures, white space is the growing preferred choice in web design.

• **Branding:** Brand/company names have different meanings in different languages: In Hebrew, *kia* means vomit and that is why the car Kia was sold in Israel under the brand name Kaia from the get-go.

• **Images:** In Nigeria, images of people handing objects with their left hand, like offering/taking money or business cards, is taboo. A “thumbs up” icon in Russia is considered rude, to say the least; on the English-language Facebook site, not so much.

• **Color:** Color preferences are very often tied to cultural and social lore. In Japan, the color red is comforting; in China, it represents success and fertility. In Western cultures, red symbolizes danger, anger or sex. In Indonesia, the color green is sacred and associated with Islam and courtrooms; in American culture, it signifies money or the environment. In Thailand, yellow is reserved for the king.

Click at left for a handy tool to visualize color conventions.
Reach: Social and economic norms, values, expectations and customs vary between cultures, specifically differences in their 1. political/societal power dynamics; 2. individualism vs collectivism; 3. femininity vs masculinity; 4. long- vs. short-term business/life
orientation; and 5. indulgence vs restraint. These categories were first introduced by cultural anthropologist Geert Hofstede in the 1990s. You can compare countries using his evaluation model here: https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison

Be aware of these cultural differences when designing your site and creating your content, incl. your site’s error messages, its navigation paths, calls-to-action, browsing and search options, privacy settings, or when choosing your visuals, incl. photos, avatars, emojis and icons.

So, what are the main points every web designer and content creator should remember when creating cross-cultural websites? If you have a defined audience in mind, face cultural restraints, or design a foreign-language website (aka localization) that tells a story that you want to resonate, be curious.
Start by researching as much as you can: search for images of your target audience’s country and its people, listen to their stories, hear their language, read about their literature, their art, their culture and their traditions. Browse local magazines and other print media and visit websites in the local language to get a feel for their design preferences. Learn on which devices they mostly access the web and talk to them about technical challenges (i.e. internet access, internet speed).

However, if you need an English-language website that reaches a cross-cultural global, diverse audience, and I believe all websites should be designed as such (aka internationalization): Design your site by stripping it of any culture-specific attributes. Here are some best practices to follow.

**IMAGES**

- Always choose images with a variety of ethnicities and genders. Use diverse stock photos (i.e. [Tonl](https://www.tonl.com)).

- Don’t assume your audience is mostly male/female. That includes making sure that your site visitors can choose various avatars.
when creating a profile on your site. Here is an article about gender-neutral marketing that I wrote about the topic that might help.

- Use icons consistently that are relevant and culturally sensitive across cultures and pair them with text to make sure they’re understood.

**CONTENT**

- Use clear and simple language, visually structure your text, get to the point and keep your content readable. No, not dumbed down. Avoid jargon, metaphors and idioms your readers might misunderstand. Native English speakers make up only 25% online. Write for the other 75%. It is also best to avoid any historical cues in your content and your design that you don’t know much about and that could offend.

- Don’t address or frame your audience by their shortcomings or their differences. This is especially important for nonprofits. Don’t create a narrative, a mission statement, or a call-to-action that stresses deficits but rather opportunities. “We help small landowners boost crop-yields ….” is far better than “We help poor
farmers in climate-stressed countries…”. Identify positive truths and focus on your audience.

- Formatting: Be flexible in your online forms when it comes to name order (which is different in some cultures and languages), name length, foreign accents, date format, addresses, postal codes and measurement units; make sure your backend accepts these inputs.

**DESIGN**

- Avoid stereotypography: Never use fonts that mimic a foreign language or an entire culture, i.e. “African” (Neuland, Lithos), “Asian” (Wonton, Chop-Suey), “German” (Gothic, Blackletter).

“The role of our interfaces is to mediate culture, to help us negotiate the intricacies of human communications,” writes Senongo Akpem in his book *Cross-Cultural Design* (published by A Book Apart in 2020). And he concludes, “Unless web practitioners build flexible, culturally responsive systems for all of us to use, many humans will never be able to participate fully in the promise and astonishing complexity of the web […] and let [their] cultural uniqueness shine through”.

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ABOUT CONTENT DESIGN LLC

Hi, I am Tekla Szymanski, founder of Content Design LLC, your one-stop shop for content strategy and web development for content-rich nonprofit and personal websites. You have a small team and even less time? I hear you. And since your website deserves an editor, writer and web designer who understands how to leverage your unique content and then adapt the right design to it, I can help you.

You have a story to tell, a mission to share or a service to offer, and we will find the right platform to build a website around your unique content needs that converts your site visitors into loyal donors, paying clients or new members.

What sets me apart?

Most web designers and developers don’t come from a content-creating background. I do.
DISCLAIMER

Cross-cultural design is essential in reaching a global audience and to convert your site visitors, wherever they may be. But the effectiveness, scalability and conversion rates that your website delivers all depend on the design, the theme you choose, the plugins you add and whether you keep all components updated, synced and backed up.

At Content Design LLC, I can help you with your cross-cultural content strategy and site design to ensure that you reach the widest audience possible.

☑ Schedule a free consultation call: bit.ly/AcuityContentDesign

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