

Culturally-adapted Products in the Global Market: Dealing with the Naysayers

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SUMMARY

Many major U.S. corporations, such as Siemens, Honeywell, Kodak and Motorola, are seeking growth through expanding their international markets. Market research indicates that key discriminators will be ease of use, minimal required training, and user productivity enhancement. But can these usability goals be achieved without careful attention to adapting user interfaces to the cultures of end users? There seems to be an imperative here to develop products that account for cultural characteristics, expectations, mental models, and preferences of target user groups. This said, a number of lingering questions and issues remain and often represent impediments to progress in this area. This SIG focuses on the following issues:

1. The homogenous global culture is taking over— This argument suggests that we are all gradually moving toward one homogenous world culture in which characteristics of national culture will have little importance. McDonald's is viewed as the prototype of this trend. If this is the future, then why bother about cultural adaptation of products? The SIG discussion centers on evidence that "inner layer" cultural traits such as values and attitudes are rather deeply held and will persist over time even though more superficial and overt characteristics of culture may change.
2. Everyone thinks the same way— There is a common notion that cultural differences in product usability are

largely aesthetic, matters of appearance. But people basically think and go about their work the same way. Make the product "pretty", use the local language, and the product will be fine. Language and aesthetics are extremely important to product design. But so are culturally dependent ways of thinking, communicating, and decisionmaking. These characteristics are discussed, together with their implications for HCI design.

3. Developers cannot possibly understand the nuances of foreign cultures— This argument holds that localization efforts are doomed because product developers can't possibly understand all the subtleties of foreign cultures. Practitioners from corporations who have addressed this issue discuss their experience with: regional development centers, local university partnerships, in-country focus groups and product testing conducted by HCI professionals from the target cultures.

4. Culturally adapted products cost too much— A common argument is that localization increases the cost of product development disproportionately to the market advantage obtained. But what happens to sales when a poorly conceived product is introduced into a target culture? How can cultural sensitivity be incorporated into standard development processes?

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