International SEO Whitepaper

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What is International SEO?

So to kick things off, what is international SEO and how does it differ from regular SEO? International SEO is the process of rolling out SEO campaigns to different countries, using a mix of different domain names, subdirectories or folders on the same domain, or using variants of the same, or different websites.

Some examples of this are as follows:

Subdomain:

us.example.com

au.example.com

Subdirectory:

example.com/au/[permalink here]

example.com/us/[permalink here]

Different website (ccTLD):

example.com

example.com.au

There is also the option of having the same website design or different websites' designs, which can add a layer of complexity ensuring that each is structured correctly and the traditional technical SEO items are addressed. Consolidating all the websites into one is generally the best option unless you have different brand names in different companies, in which you may consider the different website structure.

How to Choose a Domain Structure

There are advantageous and disadvantageous to each of the above that we will get in to, and it's important to select based on on your brand and how you want to build your digital presence. Let's take it from the top:

1- Subdomain: Subdomains, have in the past, been demonstrated to be treated as completely separate domains, which has changed the way that people have viewed this approach as it forces you to double up on marketing activities. Historical data and implementations suggest not utilising subdomains, showing increases upwards of **64% to 116%** (based on our client results) on average when migrating away from this structure. An interesting case study can be found here supporting these findings:

https://www.sistrix.com/blog/case-study-monsters-monster-growth-on-google/

For this reason, subdomains are rarely recommended even though Google states there is no major difference:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_MswMYk05tk

An exception to this rule may be a function such as a forum. Rolling out a forum on a website can often lead to a lot of technical considerations and often do more harm than good, so for this reason it is sometimes recommended to put this on a subdomain as opposed to doing it through a subdirectory unless you have a very technical team.

It is worth saying, however, that if you plan on exploiting this by having a subdomain that you use blackhat or deceptive SEO practices on, this will backfire as manual actions for subdomains can impact entire sites, as evidenced by our own findings and the following article:

http://www.thesempost.com/manual-actions-on-subdomains-can-affect-entire-site/

2- Subdirectories: A subdirectory is a great use case for international clients when looking to leverage the preexisting equity built up in a domain. A subdirectory is also a great way of consolidating different websites under one umbrella, avoiding any duplicate content issues and allowing international entities to decrease the amount of website properties that they manage.

As an agency, we have seen some great results from this kind of strategy, and have seen clients go from somewhere out of the **top 100**, to being **number 57**, or in many cases higher. In some of the studies we have done we have seen this become a large factor in top SERP

positions, with **subdomains ~43% less like to appear in top 10 positions.** In the SERPs simply by changing from a subdomain to a subdirectory. Everything else related to their site remained constant.

This evidence tells us that if you are an international entity that is expanding out or has previously expanded out and is now consolidating its properties, this is a good way to go, unless you have a lot of 3rd party software that is going to be a requirement (see forum example).

3- Seperate Domains (ccTLD): A ccTLD makes a lot of sense for entities operating in countries where only a singular common language is spoken (e.g. Israel, Scandinavian countries, Russia).

They also make a lot of sense if they are operating within the Asian market as leading search engines such as Baidu make it very hard to rank without a .cn TLD.

For countries that have multiple spoken languages, a ccTLD is often not worth the effort, they can be extremely technically challenging and rolling out new campaign strategies or websites to each ccTLD can be very expensive. There is also no guarantee that Google will show the correct version (see HREFLANG later in the piece to see how you can avoid this).

Another downside of ccTLD's is that having all these new domains names will mean that SEO efforts such as link building and even technical website elements will need to be split off to a different property.

Having said that, if you have a team with the technical know how, and a talented link building team, then choosing a ccTLD can be advantageous as the customisation options are extreme. You could roll out entirely different websites and target completely different backlinks and audiences for different locales to boost results. It can also look better in local SERP's for potential customers as they can see immediately that you operate in their country and can even be passed off as local.

In summary: In summary of the above, use subdomains if you have a lot of 3rd party services that need to be hosted (forum software, client vendor systems that need to be hosted online). Subdirectories if you are looking to consolidate assets and don't have resources for lengthy investigations or teams to manage separate properties. Finally, consider ccTLD's if you have the team and resources to manage multiple different campaigns and want a lot of flexibility and customizability in your strategies.

Now that you have picked a domain name, it's time to set up the preferred country and understand the hreflang attribute.

Everything You Need to Know About the hreflang Attribute

hreflang attribute is a method used by search engines to differentiate between different versions of similar pages and serve the most appropriate version of the page to the visitor based on his browser language preferences and region. If you are an international website, knowing how to utilize the hreflang attribute is very important when it comes to SEO.

Many webmasters agree that hreflang tags can be very tough and implementing them can take a lot of time and effort. Here's everything you need to know about them hreflang attributes – from their benefits to implementation.

What is the hreflang Attribute?

hreflang is an HTML <link> markup, or <link> tag attribute (for use in a .pdf). What it does is tell the search engine which version of the page to show in search results based on the users language and country preferences.

It looks something like this: `rel="alternate" hreflang="en-au"`

Also worth noting is that when implementing anything to do with hreflang tags it's essential to make sure that everything is being

documented so that the rules that were initially followed when establishing best practice can continuously be rolled out or revised as new markets are released. You should always take into consideration whenever localised sections are expanded on, pages of new localisations are published, or URLs are changed. Keeping hreflang tags updated and validated is an important factor and should be a priority.

Which Search Engines use this Attribute?

There are two search engines that can use hreflang as of now. Google Chrome and Yandex. Search engines like Bing and Baidu use a different attribute known as (Meta) content language attribute.

Why is a hreflang Tag so Important for a Website?

Imagine you run an online store that sells shoes worldwide. Your site is optimised for the different audiences and has pages in various languages but doesn't have hreflang. When someone who speaks Russian visits your website, they will see the English version and not the Russian. This might drive them away. This is the problem hreflang was

made to solve. Ensuring that visitors land on the page most appropriate from them.

Hreflang will help you drive up your conversions and drive down the bounce rate.

A common misconception of hreflang attribute is that it prevents Google from displaying your different pages as duplicates or spam, however that's not true. You may have different pages for American English, British English and Australian English – the differences in each of these pages will be very minimal and thus are prone to being marked as duplicates. To overcome this problem, you can rewrite the base of the content, to make it more different. Use "specialization" for the US version and "specialisation" for the British version, to utilize subtle language differences. Previous work we have done suggests that this can impact the likelihood of Google using hreflang tags by up to **14%**.

Dissecting the structure of hreflang

Take a look at this hreflang attribute:

```
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en"
href="https://www.example.com/" />
```

Going through each component one by one:

1. `link rel="alternate"`

This part shows that there is another version (or *alternative* version) of the page. Other link relationships are present as well. For example: pagination, mobile variants, and AMP variants

2. `hreflang="en"`

This part tells us the about the target audience. In this example, all your users with English set as their preference will be taken to this page. You can select language or a combination of country and language.

3. `href`

This part shows the URL of the page that will be shown to the target audience.

Implementing the hreflang Attribute

There are three ways to implement the hreflang attribute and choosing the right one for you can be a challenge but is crucial. Here's what you need to know to make the right call:

1.   Using link elements

The first method is using link elements in the <head> section of the HTML pages. Though it's considered the easiest way to implement hreflang, it can be quite time consuming if done manually.

While defining the attribute, you mention the specific version as well as the target audience. Something like this:

```
<link rel="alternate" href="http://example.com/" hreflang="en" />
```

```
<link rel="alternate" href="http://example.com/en-gb/" hreflang="en-gb" />
```

```
<link rel="alternate" href="http://example.com/en-au/" hreflang="en-au" />
```

2.   hreflang HTTP headers

If you're working with non-HTML content, such as PDFs and other non-HTML documents, you cannot include link elements. For such content you need HTTP headers. Here's an example:

```
Link: <http://es.example.com/document.pdf>;
rel="alternate"; hreflang="es",
<http://en.example.com/document.pdf>;
rel="alternate"; hreflang="en",
<http://de.example.com/document.pdf>;
rel="alternate"; hreflang="de"
```

If you have PDFs or other non-HTML documents available in different versions, it would be a good idea to make use of HTTP headers to describe which segment of your audience they are for.

3.   Implementation through an XML sitemap

Lastly, you can use your XML sitemap to implement hreflang. Take a look at this page which is meant for both the UK as well as the US audience.

```
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?> <urlset xmlns="http://www.sitemaps.org/schemas/sitemap/0.9"
```

```
xmlns:xhtml="http://www.w3.org/1999/xhtml">
<url>
<loc>https://example.com/</loc>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="en-CA" href="https://example.com/en-ca/"
/>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="en-GB"
href="https://example.com/en-gb/"
/>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="en-US"
href="https://example.com/" />
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="x-default"
href="https://example.com/"
/>
</url>
<url>
<loc>https://example.com/en-ca/</loc>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="en-GB"
href="https://example.com/en-gb/"
/>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="en-US"
href="https://example.com/"
/>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="en-CA"
href="https://example.com/en-ca/"
/> <xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="x-default"
href="https://example.com/"
/>
</url>
<url>
<loc>https://example.com/en-gb/</loc>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="en-CA"
href="https://example.com/en-ca/"
/>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="en-US"
href="https://example.com/"
/>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="en-GB"
href="https://example.com/en-gb/"
```

```
/>
<xhtml:link
rel="alternate"
hreflang="x-default"
href="https://example.com/"
/>
</url>
</urlset>
```

As you can see, you would need to spend a lot of time and effort to do this if there are a lot of pages – but there are benefits to using this method: There is no extra weight, it doesn't require a lot of database calls on page load to generate this markup and it's a lot of easier to change the sitemap than to change all the pages.

Some consider this method to be very verbose and they are right. However, this may be an appropriate option if using a customised framework that doesn't offer the ability to customise the header, or link properties are required to be done manually. This generally occurs on pages using raw html, and can pose issues on large website structures.

Making the most out of the hreflang attribute

Follow these practices to make the most out of the hreflang attribute:

- **Remember to set hreflang="x-default"**

Moz says "if your page serves up content in a variety of languages or just asks a user to select a preferred page, you can use x-default to show that the page is not specifically targeted." That looks like this:

```
<link rel="alternate" href="http://example.com/"
hreflang="x-default" />
```

When a user visits your site who's browser setting doesn't match any of the languages, he is redirected to the x=default page. It can be very useful for some international visitors whose language and region settings don't match any of your language or region codes.

- **There is no one method to implement that fits all, make sure to choose the one that works for you best.**

There are three methods and each one has some pros and cons. You as the owner/person in charge of the campaign need to carefully weigh these pros and cons and decide which one will be the best one for you.

Also remember, DO NOT use more than one method to implement your hreflang attribute as this can cause problems.

- **Clearly differentiate between language and region combinations.**

The language code needs to be in ISO 639-1 format and the region code needs to be in ISO 3166-1 Alpha 2 format. Remember, in order for Google to recognize the hreflang attribute, the language code needs to be defined first, and then the region code. Also, defining the language code is NOT optional.

- **When defining the hreflang, use absolute URL**

It is generally recommended to use absolute URLs instead of relatives URLs as relative URLs are more likely to be interpreted incorrectly by search engines.

Absolute - `href="http://example.com/about"`

Relative URL - `href="/about"`

- **Reference the page as well its different versions.**

For this to work, you need to do everything as Google instructs you. This includes defining the preferred language and the country (or region) for the page and its different versions.

- **Bidirectional hreflang attribute references are the way to go.**

Simply said, each variant needs to link the other variants. That is, all of the references must be bidirectional.

Some things to keep in mind about hreflang attribute:

1. Why sometimes search engines are not recognizing your hreflang attribute

The hreflang attribute acts as a cue for the search engines. It does not order the search engines. So theoretically, search engines can ignore your hreflang attribute, though they rarely do.

2. Using multiple hreflang attributes

If you want your page to be shown to more than one region or country, you can do that by using multiple hreflang attributes for one page.

3. Using hreflang attributes when you have only one version of a page

Now you may think that there is no point in using hreflang attributes when your page is available in only one page designed for a different audience, however while it won't have any intrinsic SEO benefits, this can come in handy in rare instances where Google is indexing you in a

country you may not operate. For example if you just service Australia as an eCommerce store but are attracting an audience that is predominantly American it is worth configuring this. Another item to note here is that even if you have a ccTLD (.com.au for Australia in this instance), this is worthwhile setting up if attracting a lot of unwanted traffic for other countries.

International SEO and GEO IP Redirects Overview

Your statistics may show that a large part of your visitors are from international markets or you may no longer be satisfied by operating in just your locale and think it's time to go international – whatever the reason may be, international SEO can pay off huge if you're in the process of expanding.

One such decision of going international is about how you choose to redirect visitors to their local version of the site, or if you do at all.

Redirecting users

Redirecting visitors is important, but isn't always necessary if you have already done the following:

- Set geo-location up in search console

- Implemented hreflang attribute in your site

- Created a hrelang sitemap

It is recommended that you setup a way of sending users to the correct page, but you can learn about the pros and cons below.

There are three main ways of redirecting these users.

1. **No Redirect:** Nothing happens when someone from Australia visits the US version of a page. They may have the option to manually select the most appropriate version of the page for them in the footer or traditionally as a country flag. An example of this is Targets international website.

2. **Automatic Redirect:** Users are automatically taken to the most appropriate version of the page based on their browser language preferences and location. They do not have any control over this process. An example of this is Microsoft's website.

3.   Pop-up: You may set up a pop-up to ask the users if they would like to visit another version of this page. For example, your pop-up might say, "You are visiting the US version of the site from an Australia-based location, would you like to visit the Australian site?". An example of this is Adobe's website.

Choosing Not to Redirect

This is when you have no mechanism in place to redirect users from the default landing pages to the one made for that user's language or country specifically. Some websites choose to go this route but generally this is avoided as it doesn't work well with international SEO. The users can (if they have the option to) manually select the page that is designed for them. Usually a list of different versions is listed at the bottom of the page, or through a country flag dropdown.

Having no redirects may cause complications when undergoing a campaign as it can cause Google trouble when determining which version of the page to display to users. For this reason, having no redirection is rarely recommended. Circumstances where it may work are in cases where you don't mind if a user is on the US or AU version of the page.

Utilising Automatic Redirects

When going international, SEO plays a very important role as new people start to look for your website. Remember, you can't just copy-paste your default version in different languages as this will cause Google to mark your different pages as duplicates. For effective SEO, you need to spend time and effort and to do the necessary research and create a strategy. Optimize your site for the best overall experience for your new users.

Now back to automatic redirects, let's say you are an online store that sells its products in many countries but due to some legal disputes, you are not allowed to sell to the US. If this was the case, your users from the US will be greeted to a webpage full of missing information and a very poorly optimized website in general. How do you overcome this problem? You might consider blocking all users from US to visit your site but… Googlebots.

For your website to be shown on the search engine results – they have to be crawled and indexed. This is the job of bots that visit each webpage of your site to index it. How is this important to you? All of the Googlebots come from US-based IP addressed (*https://moz.com/blog/google-shares-details-googlebot*) so blocking all US based IP addresses would prevent your site from being crawled and indexed – in other words, your site will not show up in Google search results.

Considerations:

There are two considerations that you face in such a case:

1.   Getting your different versions of the site indexed

If you want the pages of your site to get indexed – no matter what version then you're going to need the Googlebot which means your site with restricted content will show up too, which brings up the next problem:

2.   Getting ranked in the US when you have restrictions on your content

Having restrictions on your site often leads to your visitors seeing an incomplete version of your site. You might be considering to have one site for the Googlebots and a different one for your other international users. This is known as cloaking and is against Google's Terms and Conditions.

A solution to both these issues is the hreflang attributes that we mentioned earlier, so that Google understands that different versions exist and attempts to fetch those, potentially look at making Googlebot an exception to those redirects, but be aware of cloaking as mentioned previously. You can also refer to "How does Googlebot index other versions of my site when it's based out of US?" below in the document.

Understanding pop-up redirects

You might have seen getting introduced to a website's landing page along with a message in a pop-up window telling you that you have landed on so and so version of the page and that there is a different page made specifically as per your own language or country. That is the pop-up redirect. However, users' have had mostly negative reactions to this type of redirects. Some have gone as far installing redirect blockers to avoid facing them. One use case of this is companies that sell different products in different countries, and want to make sure that the user realises that they are browsing products in a different country so that they don't have a nasty surprise at checkout.

The cons to doing an approach like this is for some users pop ups might disjoint their experience a bit, compared to just being directly referred to the website. These pop-ups may also be blocked by Adblockers.

How does Googlebot index other versions of my site when it's based out of US?

It's quite simple – but you have to make sure that there is a link to your other versions from the US version of the site. Here's what happens when Googlebot visits the US version:

1.   Googlebot visits the US version

2.   It will index the US version and then find the links to the other versions.

3.   The bot crawls the page, finds and saves links to a database from which it can later request those pages.

4.   The Googlebot then successfully indexes all the other versions.

Final thoughts

International SEO and Geo IP redirects are incredibly useful ways of rolling out internationally, but if done incorrectly can cause nightmares and substantial drops in traffic.

If done right, it should help you improve your conversion rates dramatically and also lower your bounce rate. So remember when rolling out international SEO, you should keep these following things in mind (**DHR**):

1.   **D**omain - Choosing the correct domain structure for your use case

2.   **H**reflang - Setting up the correct hreflang tags for your property.

3.   **R**edirections - Apply the correct geolocations settings and redirect options to meet your use case.

As always, don't forget to add your site to search console, and set up geotargeting in each Google search console property.