

**Creating a successful web presence for the German market**

**The EU's largest population online**



*"If I am selling to you, then I will speak your language,  
aber wenn du mir etwas verkaufst, musst du Deutsch sprechen"*  
[...but if you are selling something to me, you must speak German]

(Willy Brandt, Former German Chancellor)

## **About this guide**

The guide is intended to help Irish companies create a successful web presence for the German market. It was developed by Susanne Dirks of e-Vorsprung Consulting ([www.evorsprung.com](http://www.evorsprung.com)) in collaboration with Enterprise Ireland's [Internet Marketing Unit](#) and Enterprise Ireland's [German office](#).

*The contents are organised as follows*

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## 1. Thinking strategically

Creating a web presence in Germany means entering a new market. So all the usual issues associated with new market entry apply. Likewise, the same questions that were posed when developing your online strategy for Ireland need to be re-addressed through the lens of the German target customer.

For example,

- What is your value proposition for Germany? Don't assume that your unique selling point in Germany will be the same as it is in Ireland; it quite possibly won't be. Think about who you will be competing against. What is it about your product that German customers will value; why should they choose you over competing suppliers?
- Who is the target audience? And how can you attract and convince them?
- What are the goals for your web presence? What actions do you want website visitors to take? Depending on your business model, this may range from simply prompting an enquiry right through to getting the visitor to perform a paid transaction?
- How can you persuade them to take those actions?
- How will you measure and track success?

## 2. Content is king

Content is what websites are about. So it is important to consider what kind, amount and format of content is most appropriate for the German target audience.

Sometimes not all the content of the Irish source website may be relevant. For example, the sections that are very local (e.g. contact address, events, blogs) should either be removed or recreated for a German audience.

In addition, there may be a need for new content. Germans love detail and like to have as much information as possible before making a decision. So it may be necessary to provide supplementary information either as text or downloadable documents. Content is especially important for search engine optimisation (SEO) purposes – a website needs to have a sufficient amount of good quality native language content, which is keyword rich in order to influence search engine ranking.

Multimedia can also be a valuable addition. Online videos are a good way of showcasing products and are popular with Germans web users.

### 3. Cultural issues: reassuring the German buyer

One of the biggest cultural divides between Irish and German consumers is their attitude towards risk and uncertainty. In international research, Germans scored among the highest in terms of 'uncertainty avoidance' behaviour among European online shoppers, while the Irish scored low.

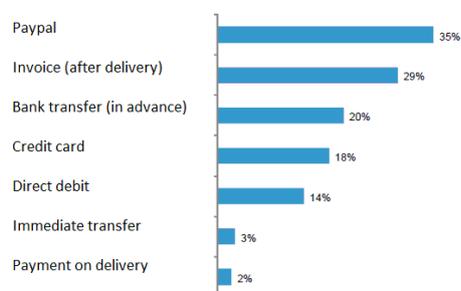
Ways to assure the uncertainty-adverse consumer and make the company look more familiar, comfortable and trustworthy to a German audience include providing

- Plenty of information to help decision-making and build trust. This could include detailed and evidence-based product descriptions; case studies, testimonials and references – ideally local and certificates and seals of proof – again ideally local
- Information on the company's history, its organisational structure and the credentials of the management team, and by the use of local terminology, such as German-specific metaphors
- Clear and predictable structures such as guided navigation, e.g. a HTML sitemap or breadcrumb navigation and clear information on the next steps in engagement process
- The provision of a customer service, e.g. an FAQ section or customer support/help; timely and appropriate responses to enquiries, information on local offices and/or local backup or contact information for local dealers/stores
- Details of terms and conditions; information on safety and security issues e.g. data privacy and payment security; local seals of trust and product guarantees and free trials or downloads

### 4. Customer friendly payment options (for e-commerce sites)

The German consumer's desire to minimise risks or uncertainties extends to his or her preferred method of paying for online purchases. As can be seen from the research results below, Paypal and payment by invoice after delivery are the most popular payment options; whereas payment by credit card upfront is far less prevalent than it would be in Ireland.

*Which of these payment methods is most frequently used by your customers?*



*Source: E-Payment Barometer, January 2013*

German e-commerce sites also tend to offer free or low-cost delivery. Acknowledging and supporting these cultural business conventions is an important element of making your website

acceptable to the German consumer. Research has shown that there is a close link between choice of payment options and shopping cart abandonment.

## 5. Achieving a high-quality translation

### Germans buy in German

It is hardly necessary to note the importance of translating the website content – both text and video – into German. According to 2011 research by the European Commission

- 35% of Germans only browse websites that are in German and 40% would not communicate in a language other than German in a professional context.
- When it comes to a complex transaction (like carrying out a banking transaction online), 81% of Germans would not do this in any other language than German.

Other research (D.A. DePalma, B.B. Sargent, R.S. Beninatto, 2006) also underscores the importance of language in buyer behaviour:

- Some 52.4% of people only buy from websites in their own language, and language is particularly important for complex and larger purchases.
- Language is also more important for post-sales support: 74.7 % of people say availability of after-sales support in own language influences their buying decision.

Significantly also, translating into the native language is important for achieving website visibility in a particular market.

### Achieving high-quality translation

The quality of the translation is critical, as it is a reflection of the company's overall approach to quality, a characteristic highly valued by Germans. Google Translate and similar tools are simply not an option. Neither is a mix of languages on one page a good idea. This is not only very irritating for visitors, it has a negative impact on search engine optimisation.

Using a professional, native German translator is the best way to ensure a correct and fluent translation. Additionally, if the content on the company's website is very specific and/or technical, the translator should ideally be familiar with the subject area.

Given that Germans love content and detail, it can be a mistake to cut out too much content for the sake of saving a little budget. That said, not translating certain sections is a better way to save money than making shortcuts in translation quality.

### Pointers to ensure quality in translation and 'localisation'

**Allow the translator to see the big picture:** If the text for translation is supplied in separate files (e.g. one .html file per web page), it is important for the translator to be provided with the context of how different webpages relate and link to each other and any graphics on the page.

**Integration of keywords:** The translator needs to be made aware of keywords and keyphrases identified for search engine optimisation, so s/he can integrate these into the text in a natural way. Ideally, the translator should have a solid understanding of how content impacts search engine optimisation. For example, German grammatical structure means that nouns and verbs get inflected according to their grammatical role in a sentence. For keyword purposes, however, these different inflections of the same term count as different terms for search engines and thus will not increase keyword density.

**Local standards and conventions:** In localising a website, it is important to adapt to local standards and conventions on matters such as colours, symbols, pictures, formats, currency and measurements. When localising from Ireland to Germany, formats and measurements are probably the two most important considerations. Differences include use of the decimal point/comma in numbers, the use of metric measurements and the need to cater for German address formats. A good translator should be aware of these issues.

**Formatting and design:** German text is longer than English text, and many German words are longer than their English equivalents. Unless catered for, this can cause problems with layout and formatting on translated webpages.

**Marketing and persuasion:** Websites are about marketing. So even when working with a professional translator, the result may not be as required. In the same way as one would use a copywriter to make native text more readable and appealing, some additional transcreation may be required. Transcreation, as per Wikipedia, is *“the process of adapting a message from one language to another, while maintaining its intent, style, tone and context”*.

**Consistency across the site and over time:** Consistency in the translation and use of terminology across the site will add to the professional feel. The use of a terminology database and agreement on a simple style guide may help achieve this and maintain consistency when updates are made over time. Other tools, such as Translation Memories can also come in handy.

**Quality assurance:** After the translation, a thorough quality check, including proofreading and testing the website, will avoid unprofessional looking mistakes.

**Updating Content:** It is important to think about keeping your German content fresh and up to date with news items, events, blog postings, etc., in order to keep it from becoming stale and dated (both in the eyes of the customer and the search engines).

## 6. Making sure Germans can find you online

The objective here is to make sure search engines find and prioritise the German website and see it as locally relevant, i.e. relevant to the German user performing the search.

### Choosing the most appropriate domain strategy

Decisions relating to domain names are typically only made only once – when the domain is created. Most Irish companies will already have a web presence and have chosen their domain name for Ireland. It may be identical to their company name and/or closely associated with company branding. Therefore, for branding reasons, in some cases, the domain name abroad will be the same as in Ireland, even if it is not necessarily keyword friendly.

But if there is any flexibility on the matter, it is good practice to make the domain name appealing to German users and search engines. A keyword friendly domain name contains word/s that provide information as to what the website is about. For example, a domain name containing the term 'buycars' indicates that the website is about buying cars. But that could be difficult for some Germans to remember and spell; so 'autokaufen' or similar would be a better option

In any case, it's a good idea to register a German equivalent of the Irish domain name – if still available – as soon as you consider establishing a web presence in Germany. The cost and effort is minimal and doing so keeps options open while decisions are being made.

It is also worthwhile brainstorming potentially keyword-friendly German domain names and, if still available, registering them as well. At a later stage, you can either use them or redirect users from that site to the real German site.

### **URL structure for Germany**

There are three options to choose from when considering your URL structure for Germany:

- A country-code top-level domain (ccTLD), e.g. [www.mywebsite.de](http://www.mywebsite.de)
- Subdirectories below a generic TLD, e.g. [www.mywebsite.com/de](http://www.mywebsite.com/de)
- Subdomains within a generic TLD, e.g. [www.de.mywebsite.com](http://www.de.mywebsite.com)

The first two of these options are the most common and have best impact in terms of search engine optimisation.

#### **Country-code top-level domain**

Using a country level domain (ccTLD), (i.e. a domain ending in .de in the case of Germany, such as [www.mywebsite.de](http://www.mywebsite.de)) provides the strongest signal to a local search engine that the website is relevant to that country. Moreover, many local users have a preference for a local country-level domain, as it instils trust.

However, while the cost of registering and hosting a domain name is minimal, creating a totally new ccTLD demands the time and maintenance effort associated with building visibility for that URL from scratch.

A better approach for time and/or budget-constrained SMEs may be to create subfolders for new countries, i.e. have a generic top level domain, such as [www.mywebsite.com](http://www.mywebsite.com) with a subfolder for Germany, i.e.: [www.mywebsite.com/de](http://www.mywebsite.com/de). The advantage of this approach is that the subfolder inherits most of the so-called *link juice* of its parent .com site. This is of particular benefit if the Irish site has been in existence for some time and has been optimised for search.

Geo-targeting should then be used to let Google know the target country. This involves using a special setting in Google's Webmaster Tools, where one can specify what country a domain or a subfolder is targeted at. This is particularly important when a generic top-level domain (e.g. .com) is used. In this case, the geo-target needs to be set for all parts of the domain relevant to a particular country.

Unfortunately, Google currently only allows geo-targeting by country, so if the subfolder of a domain is meant to target, for example, Austria as well as Germany, separate domains/folders for each country would need to be created and then geo-targeted for the respective country. However, this introduces the risk of duplication, which has a negative impact on search engine optimisation, so this is an area that needs to be approached carefully.

Regardless of the home domain URL structure chosen, *registering* a German domain name (ending in .de) is still a good idea.

Some additional considerations apply if a decision is made to set up a new ccTLD domain for Germany (.de). Due to geo-targeting, the choice of hosting location has somewhat lost its importance for search engine optimisation, but, for domains that target just one market, local hosting (in this case in Germany) is still recommended.

Another consideration is that some legal requirements apply if a German ccTLD ending in .de is chosen. For further information about these requirements, see <http://www.denic.de/en/>.

### **Keyword analysis and selection**

Achieving web visibility requires a focus on keyword analysis, selection and implementation. Keywords play a central role in increasing the likelihood that a website is found and appears in a prominent position of the search engine results pages.

For German searches, keywords will need to be German. If keyword work and optimisation has been done for any English-speaking market, translating those terms is usually the starting point.

However, good keyword analysis and selection requires both excellent translations skill and an understanding of how internet search works.

For example, the formal and correct German translation for 'mobile telephone' is 'Mobiltelefon'. This, however, is a rarely used term. For search, Germans will be more likely to use the more colloquial German term 'Handy'.

Therefore, the ideal skill-set required for German keyword identification will combine

- Professional translation skills and knowledge of the German market and local use of language.
- Knowledge and experience of keyword research approaches and keyword research tools so that keyword ideas can be checked against search trends and competitors' keywords.
- Knowledge and understanding of the company's area of business. This will ensure correct translation of the more specific or technical keywords as well as allowing a more creative use of language when brainstorming for other alternative keywords.

### **On and off page optimisation**

Search engine optimisation should be performed both on and off page.

#### On-page SEO

Once the keyword research has been done and a shortlist of keywords and keyphrases has been compiled and selected, on-page SEO is very much the same as it is for the local Irish market and involves work in relation to:

- Well-written, high quality, keyword-rich, relevant, fresh German content.
- Meaningful and keyword-rich text for meta tags, title tags, headings, link and picture anchor text and picture alt-tags for each page.
- Development and submission of an XML sitemap.
- Clear website structure and navigation.
- Appropriate use of robots.txt and of no-follow in links robots.txt, etc.

## Off-page SEO

Links, especially links from other websites to the new German website are very important for optimising the website for search.

While the original Irish site may already have plenty of Irish (or international) links, in order for the German website to appear local to the German market, it needs links from other, high quality German sites.

As well as actively seeking out links, companies should make inbound link-building easy by having the relevant share buttons on their site. As in Ireland, the obvious must-haves are Google+, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Others that should be considered for Germany include Mr Wong ([www.mister-wong.de](http://www.mister-wong.de)) for social bookmarking and [www.xing.de](http://www.xing.de) for business networking.

There are also a wide range of generic and industry-specialist online directories in Germany. Getting listed in the most appropriate directories improves off-page SEO via links and will help ensure your company is found by Germans using these directories for their search. For example, a well-known generic business directory for the German market is the so-called wer-liefert-was ([www.wlw.de](http://www.wlw.de)).

## Other local signals

The inclusion of other local 'German signals' will help the search engine identify that the website is relevant for the German market. Having a local German address and phone number is very helpful.

If you have a physical local presence and want customers to call to your office, it's also a good idea to register with Google Places, Google Maps and German business directories for the local area.

Making the website 'look German' will also build trust and engagement with German users. Content that will help with this includes coverage by local media, a list of local events, outbound links to local websites and seals of approval by local organisations.

## **7. Continuous monitoring and keeping the content fresh**

The effectiveness of the German web presence needs to be continuous and systematic monitored so that adjustments can be made to further improve the visibility of the web presence.

The most common (and free) tool for doing this is Google Analytics, which allows user to analyse the behaviour of web users in a particular target market. Similar tools, many free, also exist for other platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

In addition, it is important to monitor local online market conversations relating to the business (including company name, brand name), its market segment and its competitors. This will provide valuable business insights, ensuring companies keep ahead of their competition, protect their reputation online and respond to market trends early. This monitoring should be carried out by someone who understands data analytics and search engine marketing and also has good knowledge of the local language and local market.

Equally, it is important to consider when the content of the website needs to change and how that change (e.g. blog, news) should be handled. Ideally, the German website should regularly feature fresh content. This is important for both search engine optimisation and credibility/user appeal.

## 8. Leveraging social media

As with the overall website approach, some strategic thinking is required to formulate an effective social media plan. This should address questions like

- What do I want to achieve via social media in Germany?
- Who is my target audience and on what platforms are they active?
- What content is of value to my target audience?
- What content do I want to share?
- Which language am I going to communicate in?
- How do I deal with German replies and comments?

### Popular German platforms

As in Ireland, Facebook and Twitter are popular in Germany. In addition, a number of other platforms – both generic and specialised – should be considered.

- For professional networking, Xing enjoys considerably higher popularity than LinkedIn in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.
- For social networking targeting the B2C market StayFriends or Wer-Kennt-Wen should be considered.
- For video portals, while Youtube is number one in Germany, other popular alternatives include [www.myvideo.de](http://www.myvideo.de).

Undertaking some monitoring of selected social media platforms (and other online conversations) will help prioritise platforms and provide insight into the appropriate content approach and style of communication. It will also help identify local market issues and thus feed into the overall marketing approach for Germany.

## 9. Maintaining the customer conversation to close the deal

Whether you just operate a website or you also embrace social media, having invested all this effort in creating interest in and demand for your products and/or services, it is vital to determine how you will interact with potential German buyers during all subsequent stages of the decision-making and purchasing process, as this is what will eventually create business and revenue.

The decisions are likely to depend on a number of factors, in particular your overall business model, your channel strategy and level of physical market presence for Germany and your budget and resources.

In addition to identifying all online customer touch points, you will need to decide what kind of interaction is required for each of these touchpoints in terms of the following:

- Format of response (e.g. face-to-face, email, phone)
- Level of response (e.g. required knowledge, skills, authority, action)
- Speed of response (e.g. immediate versus same day versus same week)
- Language for response (English or German)

This will allow you to draw up a map that shows gaps and highlights new resource requirements that may be required.

Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that customer interactions initiated by the German customers are likely to be in German. So, regardless of whether you may have decided to respond in English only, you will need to have a way of interpreting the initial query.

Obviously German language proficiency and some level of cultural understanding will play a key role in developing a successful approach to online inquiries. Only 56% of Germans speak well enough to hold a conversation in English (European Commission, 2012) and 60% of Germans use only their own language for internet communications (European Commission, 2011). These figures may be taken as guideline numbers. Competence in English for your target market may well be different and may need to be established as part of your market research.

On the positive side, however, having a language management strategy, from a broader perspective, is linked with increased turnover for companies (European Commission, 2011).

## 10. Legal considerations

Operating in a different territory also means operating in a different legal environment. While legislation for the internet is largely laid down by the EU, additional national laws need to be considered.

*Legislative areas to be alert to include*

- Privacy and data protection
- Advertising
- Branding
- Copyright and web content
- Terms and conditions
- Liability
- Domain name
- Product legislation

### **The Impressum**

The so-called '*Informationspflicht*', or duty to provide information, applies to all companies with an online presence (websites, social media, etc.) in Germany. This includes appropriate '*Anbieterkennzeichnung*', i.e. information on the organisation associated with the relevant web presence, provided in an easy-to-find place.

This is typically named the '*Impressum*'. The Impressum needs to contain certain minimum details, including information about the publisher, their name and address, telephone number or e-mail address, trade registry number and VAT number. The type and extent of information required depends on the company and its business. Heavy fines may apply in the case of non-compliance.

### **Other considerations**

Terms and conditions, the so-called AGBs (Allgemeine Geschäftsbedingungen) in Germany, should also be considered carefully.

In addition, data privacy is a major concern to Germans and is covered by specific legislation. For example, if Google Analytics is used, this needs to be detailed in the *Impressum*, and certain rules will apply.

### **E-Commerce sites**

Several additional legal requirements apply to e-commerce sites. They must adhere to an extended *Informationspflicht*, which prescribes the type of information they need to supply before, about and

after the contract is closed and where and how this is integrated on the website or in the communication processes. They also must adhere to German legislation in relation to consumers rights to cancel a contract (Widerrufsrecht as per BGB Paragraph 335) or rights to return goods (Rückgaberecht as per BGB Paragraph 356).

Deploying an ecommerce offering in Germany requires serious consideration with regard to the legal entitlements of the German consumer. The right to withdraw/return has serious implications as the percentage of customers returning goods is particularly high (no charge if returned within 14 days of delivery). A company needs to plan for the minimisation of returns (e.g. by providing plenty of information to customers, so they avoid purchasing goods that don't meet their expectations/requirements).

Legal aspects can be difficult, and, if not implemented correctly, can entail considerable legal or business costs. The above are just some pointers. B2B websites typically fall under the law of the country where the company is headquartered, and this may exempt some Irish companies from having to adhere to all the rules. Regardless, complying with issues such as providing the *Impressum* will greatly improve the trustworthiness of the site for German users.

## Useful resources

### Case Studies

- [Cupprint](#)
- [Keenans](#)
- [Franchise Direct](#)