

Effective Digital

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The influence of server location on an international web site's search engine ranking

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Executive Summary

NTT Europe Online commissioned Effective Digital to investigate the influence of the physical location of a web server on an international web site's ranking in the search engines – whether or not hosting a site in the country it is targeting has a positive influence on where it is placed in relevant search results. Combining Effective Digital's experience in SEO with on-line research and a tailor-made experiment, our investigations produced the following conclusions:

- Optimising an international web site to be well placed in the rankings for relevant countries involves many of the same techniques as for local SEO, but it is crucial to help the search engines identify the country being targeted by the site. This means that greater emphasis is given to elements linked to location and language.
- The use of local domain names code Top Level Domains (ccTLDs) is undoubtedly the most important factor in defining a web site's location, but server location comes a close second.
- A web site with a .com domain name extension that is not hosted in the country it is targeting risks losing out on anything from 14% to 30% of potential traffic from search*, as it may not appear at all if the 'pages from this country' option is selected.
- A site that does use a ccTLD but that is not hosted in the country it belongs to has a measurable disadvantage over competitor sites hosted in that country
- Sites hosted using Content Delivery Network solutions (CDNs) need to put in place a strategy that prioritises serving of content from the targeted country as a default and wherever possible.

*According to statistics provided by Hitwise and iCrossing

Online Research

A search on Google based on SEO and server location brings up hundreds of discussions on web sites and forums, both official and unofficial, regarding the influence of server location on search engine indexation, as well as the corporate sites of agencies specialising in international SEO. Effective Digital visited a selection of these sites with the aim of identifying the general consensus on the key factors involved in optimising a site to target a specific country, and specifically on the importance of server location as one of these factors.

The experiment

In order to gather more in-depth information on the influence of server location on search engine rankings, Effective Digital in partnership with NTT Europe Online defined the following experiment:

A list of 25 search terms was compiled. These terms, broken into 5 groups, were chosen based on the fact that we would have a good idea of the results we would expect to see. The 5 groups were:

- NTT Europe Online related
- Terms using the word 'News' plus a geographical location
- The names of European news publications
- The names of global brands / sub brands
- Global travel-related companies

A panel of users, based in the UK, France, Germany and Spain were then asked to enter these search terms into Google in the following ways:

- Into google.com
- Into google.co.uk
- Into google.co.uk and selecting 'pages from the UK'
- Into google.fr
- Into google.fr and selecting 'pages : France'
- Into google.de
- Into google.de and selecting 'Seiten aus Deutschland'
- Into google.es
- Into google.es and selecting 'páginas de España'

In each case, a screen grab was taken of the top 5-10 results shown.

Analysis of the results involved comparing the positioning of the sites in the top 5 results, and using an IP location tool to identify where they are hosted. In this way, it should be possible to identify a link between server location and ranking in local search results.

Finally, where local domain names have been used by the sites appearing at the top of the results, but hosting is not in the target country, further searches were made using related phrases in order to measure the performance of these sites against locally based competitors.

Conclusions

Our research confirmed that international SEO, like local SEO, involves the optimisation of several elements of a web site, both off and on-site. The difference comes in the order of importance of the elements to be optimised, as the key challenge is to ensure that the search engines can identify a site's location in order to index it for the most relevant audience. Sites identified as 'local' will rank higher than those with an unclear target location.

The top 5 elements in order of priority are:

1. Domain name and use of ccTLDs if at all possible.
2. The I.P. Address of the site's web server. This element becomes even more important if it is not possible to use a ccTLD.
3. The language used in the domain name and file names of pages.
4. The language used in the text of the site itself and defined in the relevant META tag
5. The language used by and location of sites linking to the web site.

Missing out on any of these elements is likely to have an effect on a web site's ranking for the countries targeted, and this effect can range from being pushed down the rankings by competitors to missing out completely on up to 30% of potential traffic by not appearing at all for local searches.

What you can do, and how we can help

The goal of this experiment was to look specifically at the influence of a server's location on its ranking in the search engines. Whilst we recognise the importance of the other elements concerned, NTT Europe Online can specifically provide support in rectifying issues regarding hosting location. Options we propose include:

1. Local hosting in all relevant countries: This is the ideal solution, with every country site physically hosted in the country it is targeting.
2. Virtual local hosting: Your web site is centrally hosted, but each country site is allocated a 'virtual' IP Address relevant to the country it is targeting.
3. Country-targeted CDN: The advantage of a CDN is that it ensures maximum availability of web site content at all times by caching it on a network of servers and serving it from the most available server at the moment of a request. In order to take into account the SEO implications of serving content from a variety of IP addresses, NTT Europe Online's country-targeted CDN solution will focus on serving content from servers within the country being targeted by a web site, unless availability issues require it to be served from elsewhere. This solution combines the advantages and versatility of a CDN with an SEO optimised approach.

For further information on any of these solutions, please contact Sally Grandidge on 00 44 (0) 207 67 3733 or Sally.Grandidge@ntt.eu.