How to build multilingual WordPress sites that are easy to translate

Table of Contents

commit

You're on your way to upgrade your WordPress site from single-language to multilingual. This will open the world to you and allow you to gain clients from other countries. In this guide, we explain how to do this correctly. Translation will run smoothly and your marketing team will succeed.

The benefits of having a solid multilingual website

If you've been in business for a while now, you surely know that every project can go "great", "just OK", or "problematic". The difference in results between "great" and "problematic" multilingual sites is huge. Great multilingual sites allow you to accomplish your marketing goals. Problematic multilingual sites waste time, money and management attention. But worse of all, they cripple your marketing efforts.

A "great" multilingual website allows you to plan ahead and execute on your plans. You will know exactly when every part of your site will be ready (without delays and excuses). You will know how much translation costs and how long it takes. And, you will know that everything completes on schedule, so that you can execute elaborate marketing plans and get more clients.

Top mistakes to avoid when building multilingual sites

For most companies, their website is not their main line of work. Unless you're an IT company specializing in building websites, your expertise lies somewhere else - in what your business does.

Great companies often underestimate the scope and complexity of running a multilingual website. The number one mistake that companies make is to **skip steps and start translating before their site is technically ready**. This leads to wasted time, budgets and business opportunities.

The second mistake is **allowing too many technologies into the website**. This causes dependencies on too many vendors and requires complex coordination. Multilingual websites that run smoothly and allow businesses to do effective marketing are simple on the inside. They use few components, from as few vendors as possible. This leads to greater responsibility and less risks of things breaking.

Finally, the last common mistake is **lack of ongoing maintenance**. The site can look and work great on the day it goes live. However, if the software doesn't receive periodic updates and review, things quickly deteriorate. All the hard work invested into building and translating the site is wasted because of missing maintenance.

The recipe - How to build multilingual sites that are easy to translate

1. Get the right people onboard
Like any other engineering profession, building good websites is a craft. Building multilingual websites requires additional expertise, which not all developers have.

If you haven't started your project yet, it's best to start with an expert. Commit Global is working in partnership with WPML, the WordPress Multilingual plugin. WPML team maintains a directory of expert developers for multilingual websites. These developers have proven and tested experience in building, delivering and maintaining multilingual sites. They work with small and large companies to build sites of any kind.

If you're already developing your site now, it's still a good idea to bring onboard an expert from WPML. This expert can work alongside your IT team to make sure that your site will translate easily and correctly. The additional cost of bringing in an expert will quickly turn into saving. Your entire project will complete faster and with fewer iterations.

2. Pick simple and few tools for your website

A modern website is an invitation for "bells and whistles". When you build your site, everyone has a say and everyone adds "just one more critical feature". The end result of all these features and ideas can be a bloated site. Bloated sites often rely on too many technologies from too many vendors. Add on these the need to translate and maintain everything and you have a recipe for failure.

WordPress sites use one "theme" and a list of "plugins". The theme determines the visual appearance and the plugins add functionality. Make sure that both the theme and the plugins that you choose are ready for multilingual sites. Use these resources to verify:

Multilingual-ready themes
Multilingual-ready plugins

Even though you're checking that all the plugins in your site are multilingual-ready, having too many of them can turn into a problem. Many of these plugins display texts that you will need to translate. The more plugins you use, the greater the chance you get stuck trying to translate its texts.

To build advanced multilingual sites easier, WPML offers their site-building plugins for free to WPML clients. When you use Toolset (from WPML team), you eliminate the chance of inter-vendor problems. Both the translation system and the functionality of the site come from the same company. By design, everything works and if there's any problem, you're always covered (our service agreement with WPML covers you completely).

3. Decide what parts of the site require translation

Often, you can go live with marketing campaigns in other languages without translating every page on your site. It's great to translate everything, but it's better to go live early and on the lowest budget.

You should create a list of the pages that you need to translate in order to go live. WPML allows you to set translation priority to different pages on the site. This way, it's easy to later find those pages that require translation and send them all to Commit Global in one batch. Later, when you add more languages, you already have the list of pages and you can send them in a minute.

4. Do a round of tests to make sure that everything works as expected

We offer a free review service for WPML-powered sites. WPML team will review the software running on your site and tell if any additional configuration or development work is needed. At the end of this process, your site will be 100% ready for translation. You will also receive customized documentation on how to translate every part of the site.

Before you send hundreds of documents for translation, we highly recommend that you do a test translation. This way, you can identify problems on a small scale and correct them quickly.

5. Keep WordPress, the theme and all plugins up-to-date

Once your site is multilingual and translated, remember to maintain it on a regular basis. WordPress will give you notices when updates are available. However, someone needs to pay attention to these notices and respond to them.
If you're running a mission-critical website, you should test updates on a "staging environment". This allows you to see how changes affect your site before going live.
If you've hired your website developer "per project", you can receive maintenance services from the developers on WPML's list. There's a special category for developers who specialize in maintenance services.

How to get support if you need it

Your support options range from self-service forum support, to one-on-one expert assistance.
The technical support forum of WPML is open to everyone using it. If you've chosen to use WPML's testing and preparation service, you can skip the support forum and receive personal help from your own project manager.