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Practice: Technology

Topic: Localization

Globalize Your PMS

By Localizing...



By Mark G. Haley

In a previous article, we explored what it takes to create and maintain public-facing websites for a global audience of consumers (see *Going Global...Locally, Hospitality Upgrade Fall 2013*). Today's missive will apply some of the same logic to the venerable hotel Property Management System (PMS). Many writers, perhaps most notably Thomas Friedman in *The World is Flat*, make the case for broad social and macroeconomic forces homogenizing the world we live in and making borders irrelevant. While agreeing with many of Friedman's conclusions, I

find that localization (or is it localisation?) is as powerful a trend and one that we hoteliers need to buy into fully in order to support our guests and co-workers.

When thinking about the PMS, one may identify several areas that may call for localization:

- Language
 - Staff-facing
 - Field labels, screen prompts, help text, report headers and the like
 - Guest-facing
 - Confirmations and cancellations, registration cards, folios, etc.
- Number, Date & Currency Formats
- Tax Calculations
- Local Data Capture and Reporting Regulations

The over-arching strategy for addressing most of the requirements summarized above around the world is to embrace localization at the initial design phase. Erik Weller, SVP of Education at iTesso remarks "If you want to sell PMS to global hotel companies, you have to do localization by design from the beginning." Elaborating on the

concept of leveraging initial design parameters, Larry Hall, CEO of PAR Springer-Miller Systems explains that the ATRIO product “...enjoys the benefits of newer technology, built to leverage user account settings in Windows. This enables personalization readily.”

Boro Petrovic, Architect at Oracle Hospitality

In practical terms, there are three things that need to happen in order to localize language for either staff-facing or guest-facing aspects of the system:

- 1 Separate field labels, screen prompts and other content from the programming code in the database. (See mobile screen shot for housekeeping.)
- 2 Have a flag for the preferred language in either the application's user profile or in the Windows user account that tells the application which column in the database to show on the screen or the report. For guest-facing elements, this flag needs to be on the guest profile as on NORTHWIND's Maestro PMS, for example.
- 3 Someone needs to translate the base language (usually English) into the subject languages.

Image courtesy of Infor.

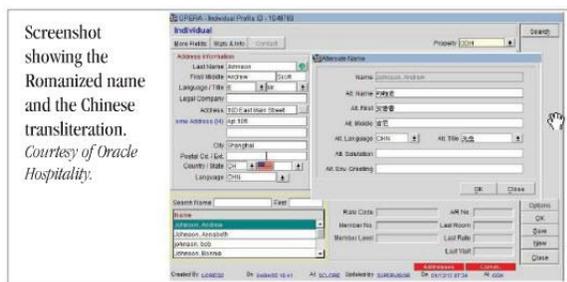
(formerly MICROS Systems, of course) explained that “Translations are done by local distributors, we don’t translate centrally. Certainly all significant European languages. Also Hebrew and several Arabic dialects (right-to-left writing); Greek, Russian, Turkish, Japanese and Chinese.” The obvious benefit of having translations done by in-region local personnel is that the translation is more likely to be idiomatically correct for the region when done by native speakers.

Translations bring with them several issues. All characters in most European languages can be represented in the Extended ASCII character set with a single byte or less of data. But Asian and

Arabic languages typically require multiple bytes of data to display accurately. This calls for the Unicode encoding standard, using the Universal Character Set generally referred to as UTF-8. It will be rare to find an application developed in this century that does not embrace Unicode.

Sometimes you need to be careful which variation of a language one translates into. Simplified Chinese is the dominant written version of Chinese used in mainland China, the People’s Republic of China (PRC). But millions of Chinese speakers reside in other nations, where the written preference is often Traditional Chinese (Taiwan, for example). Using the wrong variant in the wrong nation will almost certainly get a hotel company in trouble, so make sure you know the expectations of the specific culture, not just the language spoken.

Asian languages can present a real challenge for Western hoteliers. When an American or European front desk agent looks at a guest name written in Chinese pictograms, they see just pictures and lines. And a guest that provided their name in Simplified Chinese probably expects to see his name that way on registration cards and folios. The most effective way found to-date to handle this scenario is to capture the alternate language name in another field, with a transliteration of the Asian characters in Romanized characters that the front desk colleague can actually read.



Getting the transliteration in either direction can be a task itself. There are automated Pinyin tools in the marketplace that generally work pretty well, and another common solution is to find someone that reads the other language and can provide a transliteration. But you need to find that person in the first place!

Above I mentioned the culture as being a more specific indicator than the language alone. Culture codes can be defined as the combination of country and language, and imply other localization factors, such as currency symbol, number and date formats. A culture code of “en-GB” means that the English-speaking user from Great Britain will interpret a date of 01/02/2015 as February 1, not January 2. A price with a decimal will be notated as “£10,50” instead of “\$10.50”.

Not all language localization revolves around the desktop. A growing trend is to provide mobile devices to room attendants such that “Guest information, room assignments and special instructions are provided on the iOS device in the language of the room attendant’s choice.” explained Mukund Mohan, VP Product Strategy for Infor Hospitality.

Tax calculations are another mission-critical aspect of localization to get right. If you aren’t calculating, displaying and collecting taxes properly, the hotel will be put out of business quite quickly, and so with the PMS vendor. To this end, most vendors have developed a taxation module that can adapt to any tax

regime found anywhere in the world: percentages, flat rates, value-added tax (VAT), taxes on taxes, taxes on rates above a threshold, etc. Agilysys’ Luke Pfeifer, Director of Program Management, explains that the new rGuest PMS is “...a platform, with reusable components. rGuest modules all call on a common user interface, common tax engine, common payment engine, etc.”

Finally, another area to understand are requirements in some jurisdictions for hotels to capture passport and other guest information, present it to police and other authorities regularly. So the ability to configure passport country and number on the profile screen becomes a baseline capability. The ability to scan passports and automatically report via interface is a more-evolved requirement, expected in the PRC.

So localization is perhaps more complex than merely asserting that the world is flat. There are more nuances and aspects to these challenges than we can present here, but it is one reason why hospitality technology is the varied, engaging and challenging space it is. ■



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Article first published in Hospitality Upgrade