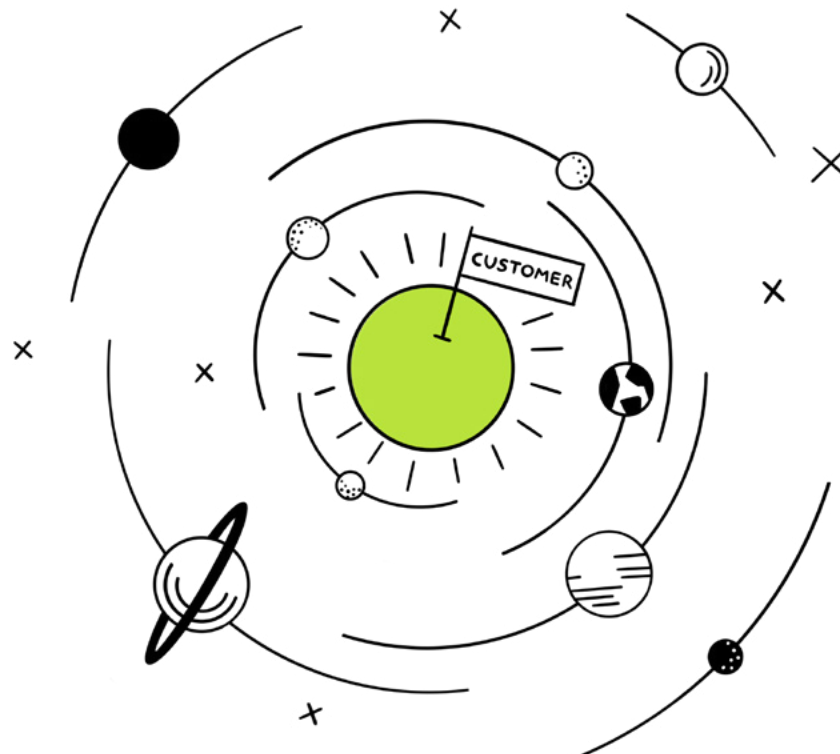


# How to Develop an International SEO Strategy



# Introduction

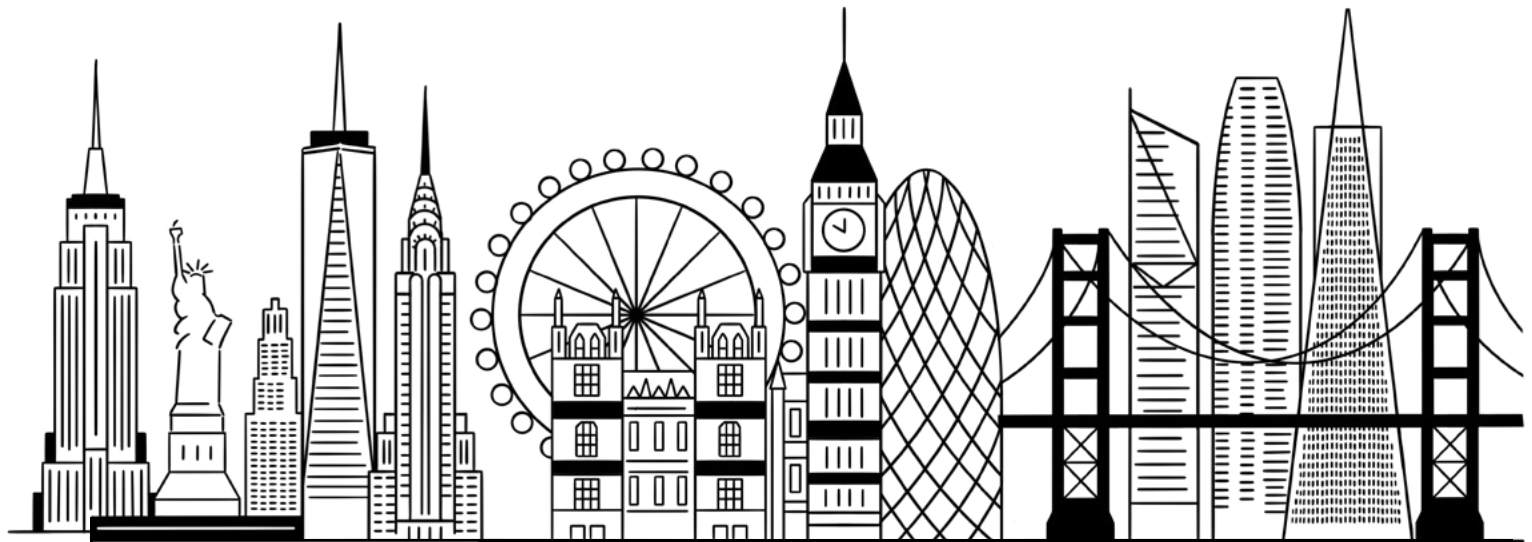
Enterprise organizations have long operated across borders. The challenge of doing so has always been to maintain a unified brand while functioning smoothly and getting found in varied markets. In response, corporate leaders have learned to coordinate their operations with the distinct cultures, languages, and time zones of the areas where they do business. But the rise of the internet has produced a new international strategy requirement: managing your global digital presence.



# What is international SEO?

**International SEO refers to optimizing your search presence for people who are in different countries or speak different languages.** It encompasses everything from site structure to cultural nuances in your content.

Global SEO is complex. It bridges multiple teams; technical work might sit with your IT department, while content teams will likely modify location-specific assets. International SEO thus requires deep corporate coordination. It also involves managing assets in multiple languages and regions, along with associated currencies, products, and features. And localization can get extremely technical, requiring developer resources to administer on-page HTML elements and complicated site structures.



# Why is international SEO important for enterprise companies?

Modern communication technologies like the internet famously [shrank the world](#), connecting people thousands of miles apart in an instant. It's now easier than ever for companies to tap into global markets. But even with increased international access, localization is still critical. Customers across borders expect a seamless, relevant experience whether they are in Belarus or Bangkok. Moreover, a lot can go wrong, leaving customers confused and unsatisfied.

Search engines attempt to serve the most relevant content to the right person in the right location based on a variety of signals. But given the enormous scale and complexity of modern websites, corporate structures, and global cultures, their algorithms need help. And if a customer has a bad experience, they won't blame Google—it inevitably reflects poorly on your brand, or the customer will end up ingesting inaccurate or incorrect information.

Inadequate international SEO can even have legal consequences. Rules and regulations vary significantly from one region to another. Serving a U.S.-specific page to someone in France, for example, could result in fines under the [EU's privacy scheme](#), not to mention damage to your reputation.

## How to do international SEO

Global SEO has never been more crucial or more complex. Doing it right will result in a better user experience (happier customers) and improved traffic and revenue (happier executives). In this section, we go into detail about how to improve your international digital strategy and the key functionalities to look for in an enterprise SEO platform to help you do so.

# International SEO Checklist

## Technical international SEO

### Identify a site structure that works for your business needs.

- ☑ Decide which areas and/or languages you want to target.
- ☑ Doing this before you start structuring your site can save you hours down the road. Once you've set your site structure up, it can be difficult to change, but not impossible.
  - Implementing a new structure for your existing site or updating your current structure is a much heavier lift, but it's still worth the investment given the impact it will have.
  - While it's best to incorporate before your initial website launch, either approach will require team-wide support to implement correctly, so plan accordingly.

### Choose the right international search engines.

- ☑ Not all regions use Google—make sure you target regional search engines like Baidu and Yandex, your content gets indexed on these engines, and you implement a method for tracking performance over time.

### Target the proper languages and regions using hreflang.

- ☑ **Hreflangs** are code snippets that tell search engines the language of a given page.

## What global functionality should you look for in an enterprise SEO platform?

### Set up your account for success.

- ☑ Make sure you're tracking the right keywords, domains, and locations.

### Track your true visibility with the right search engines.

- ☑ SEO platforms should support the best search engine for your international strategy.

### Create and manage content for international audiences.

- ☑ Any SEO solution should proactively recommend content for each of your audiences, help you take action on those recommendations, and allow you to make changes from within the platform.

### Monitor and prioritize hreflang issues.

- ☑ Your technology partner should ensure that hreflang is properly implemented across your site and prioritize any fixes.

### Track your Core Web Vitals to support site health.

- ☑ Best-in-class platforms monitor and flag Core Web Vitals at the level of individual pages and across your site.

## International content SEO

### Transcreate, don't just translate.

- ☑ Transcreation involves crafting content that fits not only the right language but also the cultural nuances of a place, while avoiding other issues resulting from inaccurate translations.

### Measure and report on your progress.

- ☑ Create regional KPIs since KPIs in one region may look very different from those in another.
- ☑ Make sure you set up robust reporting with an enterprise SEO platform.

# Technical international SEO

Technical implementation and optimizations form the bedrock of international SEO success. While implementation may seem difficult or complicated, a solid technical foundation will drive ROI for years as international traffic flows to your website.

## Site structure: language, country, or hybrid?

It may seem obvious, but before you do any optimization or site structuring, you need to **figure out which languages or regions you want to target**.

Language targeting is perhaps the easier route because there are fewer languages than countries in the world. But be sure to **disassociate language from country**. Targeting Spanish for a page may yield an enormous global audience, but readers from Spain and readers from Puerto Rico will likely have very different needs and expectations.

If you choose to focus on language differentiation, then you should use [hreflang code snippets](#) on your pages (explained below), and structure your site in one of the following ways:

**Subfolders:** `example.com/en/`

- This option is preferable because it's easier to modify in the future.

**Subdomains:** `en.example.com`

**Parameters:** `example.com/?lang=en`

Perhaps you'll decide that country-level targeting is right for you. This can be useful for companies whose content changes depending on location, like retailers that offer distinct products, shipping, customer service, pricing, or images based on a user's country. Country-level targeting can also help you abide by local regulations. Here is how you can structure your site if you go down the country route:

**Here is how you can structure your site if you go down the country route:**

**Subfolders:** `example.com/us/`

**Country code top-level domains (ccTLDs):** `example.us`

**Subdomins:** `us.example.com`

**Separate domains:** `anotherexample.com`

**\*Note:** We don't typically recommend separate domains since it will dilute the authority you've earned from your main domain.

However, you may elect to go with a hybrid approach, structuring your site to target both country and language. This is helpful because a country's language can vary internally—consider Switzerland's four official languages. If you have the resources to geo-target and translate content, this is the best option.

**You can combine all the examples above to target both language and country:**

**Subfolders:** `example.com/us/en/`

- *Tip: Make sure to put the country subfolder first.*

**Subdomains and ccTLDs:** `en.example.us`

**Parameters:** `example.com/?lang=en-u`

Be sure to think through this decision, as [changing your site structure later](#) will likely be difficult and costly in terms of traffic.



## Choose your search engines

Despite its dominance in the U.S., Google is far from the only noteworthy search engine globally. You'll want to educate yourself on top players in markets like China (Baidu), South Korea (Naver), and Russia (Yandex). While there are commonalities between the search engines—they perform the same basic functions of crawling your site, indexing its content, and serving it in response to the perceived intent of a query—there are some key differences.

For instance, Baidu favors sites that are hosted in mainland China and that do not contain assets from blocked domains (like Google Maps or YouTube embeds). Naver's semantic index is entirely based on Korean grammar, making English content irrelevant. And Yandex has a "regional binding" tool that allows site owners to explicitly target distinct regions with their content, in addition to hreflang tags.

Tracking both your performance and search volume on these global search engines is important to your international organic strategy.

## Implement hreflang to avoid cannibalization

Your site might have multiple versions of a page that target different languages or countries. If search engines see these pages as identical, you could experience loss in rankings due to rank cannibalization. Hreflang is the solution to this dilemma.

## Hreflang is a piece of code that accomplishes two key things:

### 01.

These tags help search engines better understand the relationship between your various pages, which tells them which page to show when—accounting for both the language and country that you want to target.

### 02.

By instructing search engines on which is the right page to show the right people, hreflang tags also greatly reduce the risk of cannibalization. You are less likely to cannibalize traffic that should go to other countries, and they are less likely to cannibalize traffic that should come to yours.

You can apply hreflang to either an individual page (via HTML or HTTP headers) or a set of pages (via your XML sitemap).

Imagine you have a product page that ranks well on Google in the U.S. You plan to launch in Australia and Switzerland, so you create new versions of the page for each region. To avoid cannibalization, you will want to tag this entire “cluster” of pages with all of the languages and countries you are targeting. Your hreflang tags would look like this:

### **Hreflang Tag Structure Examples to Avoid Cannibalization**

**hreflang=“en-us”**

**Tells search engines that the page language is English and the country is the U.S.**

**hreflang=“en-au”**

**Tells search engines that the page language is English and the country is Australia.**

**hreflang=“fr-ch”**

**Tells search engines that the page language is French and the country is Switzerland.**

When correctly implemented, hreflang tags tell search engines to recognize different versions of a page as “alternates,” meaning they will be swapped out depending on where the searcher is located.

Proper implementation of hreflang is challenging, but it improves user experience considerably; visitors to your site will now only see relevant content and currencies. You can be sure that any country-specific rules and regulations are followed. And notably, your hard-earned ranks will not be affected by cannibalization.

# International content SEO

Once you have a solid technical foundation for your international sites, the next step is to create content that provides value to users in each region that you care about.

## Translation vs. transcreation

Localization of content is an art, and simple translation won't cut it. Translation refers to word-for-word transcription of content from one language to another. While it may seem appealingly easy to outsource such work, translation falls short of capturing the full nuance of a piece of content. Not to mention the negative impact it has on customer experience and rankings.

Transcreation, on the other hand, means taking local cultural context into account. Intent, style, tone, and context can change depending on your audience. For instance, consider local variance in holidays. **Black Friday and Cyber Monday** are key shopping days in the Western Hemisphere, while **Single's Day** is China's celebration of consumerism. A company with a presence in both regions must adjust not only sales assets but also content strategies to account for this cultural difference.



Transcreation doesn't stop with understanding different holidays. Target personas can change from country to country. People that purchase your products in one region may have different demographics than those in another. For example, perhaps purchasers of robotic vacuums in the U.S. tend to be [affluent early adopters](#) interested in new technology, while [consumers in Japan](#) see the product as more of a day-to-day essential for improving health. In such a case, pure content translation isn't enough. In the U.S., you would want to focus content on explaining technology and features, while in Japan, you would want content to highlight more practical time and health benefits.

## Measure and report on your progress

Besides creating the right content, you will need to set up proper reporting so that you can measure the impact of changes and share your success with project owners. We've repeatedly written about the importance of SEO reporting when it comes to [getting budget from the C-suite](#).

KPIs get even more complex when you take a global SEO strategy into account. You'll want to ensure that your reporting is clear, reproducible, and—if possible—consistent across regions. But consistency doesn't mean that you will always measure the same things: KPIs in one region may look very different from those in another.

Make sure you set up robust reporting with an enterprise SEO platform to measure your international SEO strategy.

# What functionality do you need in an international enterprise SEO platform?

Managing all this global SEO complexity requires an SEO platform that operates across search engines, audits your technical foundation, and oversees end-to-end content creation and reporting. Here's what to look for when identifying the right solution to support your international efforts.

01.

## Set up your account for success

SEO platforms generally require some setting up in order to maximize value down the line. You'll want to track your most important keywords on the right domains and in the proper locations. Your keywords should also be bucketed into semantically-related categories, making it easier to find insights from the data.

This process can get complicated, and it's best to have professional support. Conductor's team of audience research experts, for example, onboards every single customer. Our analysts have extensive experience working with complex international accounts, and they work directly with your team to tailor the platform to your needs. They also categorize the data so that you can start getting insights right away. Make sure you find an SEO partner that sets up your account right to provide you with the best possible long-term results.

## 02.

### Research the search engines that matter

You need to track your visibility on the right search engines to understand your true online presence across the globe. Most enterprise SEO platforms allow you to track data on Google in various international markets. But this doesn't account for the [14% of global searchers](#) that use a search engine other than Google.

If you do business in countries like China, South Korea, or Russia, then you should ensure your enterprise solution supports local search engines. Baidu dominates the search landscape in China, boasting a [74% market share](#) and 558 million active users (more than the entire population of the U.S.). Naver accounts for about 60% of the market in South Korea, though this is shrinking as [Google grows its presence](#) there. And Yandex is the search engine of record in Russia, [owning over 60%](#) of all searches.

No matter where your business needs take you, your SEO partner should have you covered. For APAC search engines like Baidu and Naver, Conductor partners with [Dragon Metrics](#) to provide keyword and rank data within our platform. We are also the first and only enterprise organic marketing platform to support rank and keyword tracking for [Yandex in Russia](#). Drive growth in APAC and Russia with robust support for global search engines in Conductor.

### 03.

## Create and manage content for international audiences

Any top-tier SEO platform should not only proactively recommend content for each of your audiences but should also help bring it to life by linking it to your existing marketing workflow. Your technology should also allow you to make changes directly to pages from within the platform itself, bypassing your CMS. This is important because it lets you conserve valuable developer resources and make changes fast, responding to real-time performance signals.

Conductor helps you manage your content from creation to optimization. [Content Guidance](#) provides real-time recommendations prioritized by business impact. When combined with [Explorer for global keyword research](#), it takes the guesswork out of your international content strategy.

You can then take action on these recommendations within Conductor's platform using [Content Briefs](#). By pushing your briefs directly to project management tools like Asana, Jira, and Trello, you can streamline your content creation workflow and manage complexity across teams. Once your content is online, it's easy to edit your international pages directly from within Conductor using [Conductor Live](#). No other platform offers such a comprehensive solution for international content.

## 04.

## Monitor and prioritize hreflang issues

Proper hreflang implementation is vital to ensuring your content appears to the correct audiences in the right locations. Any robust SEO solution must monitor the entirety of your site and report on issues like:

- **Missing or broken hreflang tags**
- **Incorrect language or region order**
- **Lack of self-referencing attributes**
- **Conflicting hreflang targets for the same audience**

But it's not enough just to report on these issues. Technical SEOs and developers operate in a resource-constrained environment. They need to prioritize fixing the problems that will have the biggest impact on their bottom line: traffic and revenue.

In February 2022, Conductor **acquired ContentKing**, a site auditing, and monitoring solution. It's the only platform that offers 24/7, real-time hreflang monitoring. It also prioritizes auditing the international pages that matter most, intelligently focusing on pages that drive the most authority and traffic to your site. It crawls those pages most frequently to make sure nothing stands in the way of your content's success.



05.

## Track your Core Web Vitals to support site health

Google's Core Web Vitals (CWV) measure the technical components of your site that most impact user experience.

A [key ranking factor as of 2021](#), they are important for international indexability. CWV measures include:

- **Largest Contentful Paint (LCP):** LCP is the time it takes to render the biggest content element on the page, like an image or video.
- **First Input Delay (FID):** FID is the time from when a user first interacts with a page to when the browser responds.
- **Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS):** CLS is the amount that your page's layout shifts while it loads.

Your SEO partner should measure CWV stats across your site proactively, without waiting for an entire crawl to run. Such a delay could impact your bottom line on pages that bring in high traffic and conversions.

ContentKing, Conductor's newest acquisition, monitors [each of the above metrics](#) across your entire site—no crawl necessary. It will alert you the moment your international pages no longer pass the web vital assessment. If you need to drill down to the individual page level, then you can dive into the [Lighthouse Web Vitals within ContentKing](#). The platform offers at-a-glance scores for each page's performance over time. You can also create custom filters that will flag individual pages that are underperforming and dragging down your ranks.

## Get ready to go global

You should now have a solid foundation for embarking on your international SEO journey and identifying the right enterprise SEO technology partner to help you ensure success. Want to learn more?

Schedule a live demo with our international SEO experts today.

[GET DEMO](#)