

Language - USP or barrier?

During the imminent South African Tourism Indaba hundreds of tourism-related organisations and operators will be touting their tours, hospitality offerings and products - each pushing their unique selling points (USPs) to the utmost and trying desperately to differentiate themselves. Yet how many have considered the edge that an awareness of the issue of language can have on the bottom line?



Dr Nico Nortjé, CEO of Language Inc

According to Dr Nico Nortjé, CEO of Language Inc., a South African language services company translating to 5 languages, understanding and acting on the cultural and linguistic diversity across the world is the key for exceptional tourism marketing.

Linguistic ability has indeed become a valuable asset in the tourism industry - both in terms of the content of marketing material and in the creation and upkeep of a relationship with the client. The ability of staff to communicate with customers in their own languages is vital if the industry wants to flourish as customer satisfaction - and consequent positive word of mouth and return visits - very much depends on the interaction between customer and service provider. We all know how a simple 'hello, how are you?' in your mother tongue can bring a smile to your face when in a foreign country.

According to an [article by Dorine Reinstein](#) posted on tourimsupdate.co.za language is still a major barrier, especially for Chinese travellers to South Africa. Their experience is that the country is ill equipped to provide services in their own language, which forces them to travel to SA in the company of their own tour guides.

"Most of the Chinese tourists who head to Africa are not that well versed in English," Dai Bin, President of the China Tourism Academy, was quoted as saying in a Chinese newspaper. "Unlike Europe and the US, where there are lots of Chinese tourist guides and signs written in Chinese, it is rare to see Chinese signs in Africa. The language obstacle deters many Chinese customers from visiting the continent."

The universal language?

Tourism is an information-intensive industry in which organisations rely heavily on communication with tourists through various channels to market and promote their products and build customer relationships. But surely English is the universal language of business, you say? Research will have it differently. According to Lior Cohen, Vice-President of Net-Translators, only about 15% of the global population speaks English as a first or second language. Apparently, most people around the world surf the internet in their mother tongue. And we know that a customer's travel experience often begins online.

Which brings us to your website.

Did you know that around three-quarters of the content on the internet is in languages other than English?

According to Dr Nico Nortjé, additional languages take your website and, consequently, your reach, to the next level. "Naturally, you cannot accommodate the world's 7106 languages, but you can target certain countries based on your market research and then communicate to those prospective tourist markets in their own language. Companies can begin by not only translating their website, but by localising the content (making sure the content is also culturally relevant and respectful) to provide well-translated descriptions, reviews and localised payment options."

English evidently still dominates other languages when it comes to public signs and promotional publications. Foreign languages are increasingly used by tour operations and travel agencies but the hospitality sector, including accommodation and eateries, mostly rely on English.

"While an incorrect or out-of-context translation can sometimes elicit nothing more than a chuckle, such errors can have significant communication and even financial consequences for a tourist service provider," said Dr Nortjé. "The ideal is to keep language in mind when employing staff, when developing your marketing material and when conversing with your guests - even a few choice phrases will go a long way in creating a memorable experience for your guests."

For more information, go to www.language-inc.org

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