LABELING: SAME LANGUAGE, DIFFERENT COUNTRIES – DIFFERENT TERMS

A distributor's failure to incorporate different versions of a language into its labeling strategies can significantly increase costs down the line.

Ask marketing or documentation managers what languages their company has translated its labeling into, and chances are that their answer will include one or more of the following: French, Spanish, and Chinese. Most managers get a rude awakening when they discover that there is more than one version for these languages.

What is being discussed here is not based merely on stylistic differences. The French language has several major forms around the world, two of the most notable being the Parisian and Canadian variants. Similarly, the Spanish spoken and written in Latin America can differ markedly from the Castillian used in Spain. North- or Latin-American distributors may want to tailor European marketing literature for local markets.

Labeling and regulatory issues are a notable concern. It is not uncommon for standard regulatory verbiage to differ from locale to locale (e.g., the European versus Latin-American term for *device* or *dosage*). It is equally common for basic technical terms to differ from country to country. A common example is the Spanish word for *computer—ordenador* in Spain and *computadora* in Latin America. Many terms easily understood in one locale could either make no sense in another locale or, worse, cause confusion that can spark regulatory concern.

With Chinese translations there are other issues to address. Marketing or documentation managers are asking, "Which version should be used— Cantonese or Mandarin?" The fact is that these are two *spoken* dialects. So, the more appropriate question would be, "Which written version should be used?" Mainland China uses the "simplified Chinese" character set—a form of the language with more simplified characters—that was implemented in the early 1900s. Hong Kong and Taiwan use the traditional character set. The differences between the two sets are fundamental, to the extent that it is not merely a linguistic oversight but a political gaffe to send traditional text to the mainland or simplified text to Taiwan. Similarly, a U.S. firm that produces one version of Chinese for both geographies in an effort to save expense may be looked down upon.

The degree to which companies need to be aware of regional language variants depends on a few factors such as the nature of the text and terminology. Some niches happen to have terms with a greater degree of difference in each region. If the differences are substantial, a company may be forced to have a local version. Although Canadian readers may be able to adequately understand text intended for a Parisian audience, they might scratch their heads at a few terms. Companies like Microsoft are so dependent on appearing local that they routinely come out with fully localized versions for Canada and Latin America.

Marketing concerns are also an issue when determining whether or not to localize text. Certain companies will tailor their strategies depending on market size. As a result, Brazil might merit its distinct Portuguese version, while Canada might have to settle for the European translation.

Here are a few bits of advice for managers trying to cope with regional language variants:

- Raise the level of awareness. For example, "Should we produce both Chinese versions?" should be a commonly asked question.
- Be aware that regional variants can have serious technical implications for labeling or IT staffs. Producing traditional or simplified Chinese characters, for example, may require an entirely different operating system and set of fonts. One version cannot easily be converted to another with a simple font change. Furthermore, the original version of a file may become unreadable if the correct supporting files are not installed. In such cases, consider researching the use of EPS or PDF files.

Adopt a long-term view. As the international sales of a company expand, the numbers of languages that text is produced in will probably have to expand as well. Consider adopting a company-wide standard for language abbreviations, such as ISO 639 or ISO 15924. Make sure that your company has plans to support Unicode in its databases and multilingual documentation.