



User Experience Design for Immigrant Populations

BY FILIPP SAPIENZA | *Member* (Dedicated to Nathaniel)

ACCORDING TO A 2015 United Nations report, there are more than 230 million immigrants worldwide (United Nations International Migration Report). And within popular technical communication and user experience (UX) markets, immigrant users represent significant populations. The most recent statistics, for example, report over 41 million immigrants living in the United States, or approximately 13% of the total population (Migration Policy Institute), while Western Europe contains 33.5 million individuals born outside of the European Union (Eurostat). Thus, immigrants represent important and growing populations that need to be considered in relation to technical communication and UX practices.

Creators of digital content for immigrants, however, face situations that cannot readily be addressed through traditional cross-cultural development methods. These traditional processes emphasize the translation of websites for individuals from a culture different from that of the developers. Yet when creating materials for immigrant populations in the same nation, developers must understand not only cultural differences, but also *how distinct immigrant cultures mingle and interact* in the host society. Because immigrants balance multiple cultural identities, content creators need to focus on bringing the multiple facets of immigrant identity together.

This article details three principles UX developers can implement to create websites tailored to the multiple cultural identities of immigrant users. These principles are to:

- ▶ Analyze and apply schemes from websites created by the immigrants themselves;
- ▶ Transcreate content, layout, and navigation according to the multiple cultural experience of users; and
- ▶ Rework user analysis and test protocols to aid immigrant users.

This three-part approach allows UX developers in technical communication to focus on areas essential to

creating materials for individuals from one culture, but living in another.

Analyze and Apply Techniques on Immigrant Websites

The path of immigration is often difficult, sometimes perilous, and always fraught with profound challenges of getting around in a completely new society. To mitigate these challenges, immigrants access immigrant websites (also called *diasporic* or *virtual immigrant communities*) that help them adjust to life in the new nation in which they have relocated. These sites contain resources that help immigrants find others from their original societies in the new country.

Diasporic sites include links to professionals who speak the immigrants' native language, information about local ethnic stores, and opportunities to socialize online with others (for an example, visit www.russianseattle.com). These resources are often created at a grass-roots level by the immigrants themselves and for other immigrants. Moreover, government agencies are also seeking to develop resources to help immigrants gain access to health and government services. (For an example, see the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Latino healthcare website at www.cuidadodesalud.gov/es/.)

In my own work with Russian immigrants in the United States, I have found that virtual diasporas provide insights on how combining cultures takes place. For example, the website www.russianseattle.com has Russian artistic and literary content as well as links to Russian media. The design of the site is in the Russian language and features muted grey, white, scarlet, and blue colors common on the Russian national flag and on other Russian sites. The central picture on the site, however, features a shot of the Seattle space needle, an American symbol.

A closer inspection of the site shows more cultural mixing. The стол справок (information desk) page

contains links to American and Russian resources written in both Russian and English. Прогулки по Интернету (A Stroll through the Internet) juxtaposes American and corresponding Russian search engines side by side in table format. The title of Русские бизнесы (Russian businesses) page has been Americanized into “Russian Yellow Pages of Business,” providing links to local Russian-speaking doctors, lawyers, accountants, and others.

Opportunities for connectivity with fellow immigrants should be taken to heart by developers. Connectivity is highly valued by immigrants, and as such, provision of it increases the credibility of the site. On the Russian Seattle site, a forum and associated Facebook page (www.facebook.com/groups/SeattleRU/) offer opportunities for users to connect with each other.

Virtual diasporas also serve as counterparts to local ethnic communities where immigrants shop, dine, and socialize. Developers will benefit by visiting the communities (e.g., Brighton Beach, Little Italy, and Chinatown in New York) that inspire the websites in order to gain additional clues as to the aesthetic, literary, culinary, communal, and geographic dimensions of the group.

Transcreate Content, Layout, and Navigation

When working with immigrants, one might believe that translation is not necessary. Because immigrants must learn the language and habits of the new society, what is the point? The research suggests otherwise. In addition to translation, immigrants seem to respond positively to websites that have been *transcreated*.

As Silvia Inez Salazar writes, *transcreation* includes both language translation and bringing into focus traditional cultural values through photos, color, organization, and so forth. For immigrants, transcreated culture is a hybrid of original and new cultural elements. One culture is not excluded; rather, it is mixed in with other cultural influences.

On russianseattle.com, the Еврейская жизнь (Jewish life) link provides an example of transcreation. Content is available in both English and Russian and, in some cases, Hebrew. The developers combine content through a consistent interface widget: a carousel on the portal lets users rotate through pictorial links sensitive to Russian, American, and Jewish interests, yet they do so in a way that does not disturb the larger organization of the site.

This combination of interface standards established in the west with content of the original culture also turns up in my work with Mexican-American users. Participants compared American, Mexican-American, and Mexican city and food sites. The Mexican immigrants performed tasks better when using websites with content that highlights Mexican culture, but that have organizational and interface elements more common on American websites. They also rated such sites more highly than those that focused only on one culture or the other.

For these users, transcreation involves not only the development of content and aesthetics, but also reaches

deep into the interface and navigation. UX developers must therefore keep in mind that immigrants’ cultural preferences extend to structural site elements. Through comparative analysis of existing sites with actual users, developers can separate and identify the elements that users value most.

The key is to assess how users select the interface elements they like best. Doing so involves identifying things like:

- ▶ What kind of text and what language(s) are preferred? Equally important, how to select the language?
- ▶ How best to organize the site layout?
- ▶ How to order chunks of information?
- ▶ What types of navigation to deploy?
- ▶ What color(s) to use for links and menu items?

Modify User-Research Protocols

I once did a study involving immigrant users from Malaysia. The study required an equal distribution of male and female participants to design effective materials. Religious customs for some participants, however, specified that female participants could not attend a test session by themselves. As test facilitator, I found myself asking questions like:

- ▶ Would individual user data from these participants have to be qualified in reporting?
- ▶ Would users with this requirement need to be omitted from analysis?
- ▶ Would qualification of or omitting these users compromise the integrity of the results?

These issues pose challenges to established user-testing protocols. The question for the UX specialist thus becomes, “How does one garner accurate data on user behavior when testing situations differ from participant to participant?”

Another challenge to protocols happens in the screening and selecting phase. User studies typically require participants to submit background information. Yet immigrants are often fearful of providing this information. In my studies, some of the immigrants from Russia expressed concern that word of immigration may get back to their countries of origin, and that authorities there may take retribution against family members. Mexican participants were reluctant to share the rationale for not providing background information, but it may be assumed that their fears stem from the ongoing uncertainty over U.S. immigration policy.

With certain populations, the process of ethnic identification can become complicated. Some Russian-American immigrants, for example, identify themselves as “Russian American” even though they are technically not Russian, having come from former states of the Soviet Union with large populations of Russian speakers (e.g., Ukraine, Belarus, and Latvia). In other cases, immigrants from these nations hold ambivalent attitudes toward Russian culture and society due to political tensions. As a result, they define themselves in religious and ethnic terms first (e.g., indigenous, Ukrainian Russian, Muslim, Tajik, etc.) and as Russian American second.

Because of the sensitivity with which participants might embrace or reject an identity classification, UX specialists

need to allow for leeway during the processes of screening and selecting prospective users. UX developers should consider letting participants define how they fit into certain categories.

Protocols for interacting with immigrant users can also be complex, for culture shapes peoples' perception of relationships. Some participants asked me for personal advice on where to find laundromats and the best place to send their toddlers to day care. In these instances, participants responded to me positively after I gave them the information. Even though I still consider myself a student of the Russian and Spanish languages, I nonetheless found that trying to speak to participants in their original languages made them feel relaxed and more open to sharing.

It is at points such as these that an understanding of the culture of the immigrants becomes important. Both Russian and Mexican cultures have strong traditions of establishing trust through interpersonal relationships and informal networks rather than through institutions and bureaucracies.

I recognized that my manner of responding might have altered performance metrics. However, sticking to a strict protocol might have made participants too anxious to provide honest feedback about the sites they were testing. Allowing participants to use their original language to perform tests, complete forms, and air feedback precluded the apprehension that an immigrant sometimes experiences when trying to use a language—English—that they feel less comfortable speaking.

Take Aways

Cultural issues play an important role in the development of usable content for immigrants. These groups use websites in ways that combine more than one culture. Web development should therefore incorporate the multiple cultural influences of immigrant audience because:

- ▶ By analyzing existing immigrant websites, online content creators can see how different cultures are brought together in action.
- ▶ By transcending content, layout, and navigation, Web developers will better serve the interface requirements of immigrants.
- ▶ By modifying and relaxing user analysis protocols, UX specialists will better meet the “face” needs of the immigrant audience.

UX developers can often trace design issues to a cultural source. They will therefore benefit from a deep knowledge of the historical and sociological patterns of the group for which they are developing content. Go beyond the established usability practice for global communication and consult local sources (for example, individuals in a local ethnic community) for insight, and be prepared to modify your approach accordingly. (See the References and Further Resources sections at the end of this article.) Toward this end, content development can greatly benefit by including individuals who are members of the same ethnic group in the design and development processes.

Immigration is hugely important, not just to the United States, but to many countries. As immigrant and multi-ethnic users grow in importance and number, UX developers will do well to devise innovative approaches that account for the diverse cultural and practical needs of these individuals. The ideas and approaches presented here can provide a starting point from which UX professionals can further investigate the expectations of these cultural groups.

Further Resources

- ▶ The Pew Research Center (www.pewresearch.org/topics/immigration/), for surveys and data on immigration trends to the United States.
- ▶ *Digital Diasporas* by Jennifer Brinkerhoff (2009) offers case studies of virtual immigrant communities.
- ▶ Irina Shklovskii, Janet Vertesi, and Silvia Lindtner. 2014. Introduction to This Special Issue on Transnational HCI. *Human-Computer Interaction* 29: 1–21. (A special issue that outlines a growing subdiscipline in UX development called *transnational HCI*.)
- ▶ *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario (2007). An example of a personal narrative—a genre that is abundant in popular literature. **i**

FILIPP SAPIENZA is a user experience analyst and Web developer in Colorado. He has published research about international and immigrant usability in scholarly and trade venues. He has over 20 years of professional information technology experience both in business and in higher education. For more information, visit www.filippasapienza.com or find him on Twitter @FilSapienza.

REFERENCES

- Eurostat. Migration and Migrant Population Statistics. Accessed 6 January 2016, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics.
- Migration Policy Institute. Accessed 6 January 2016, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states.
- Salazar, Silvia Inez. 2010. Language Barriers in Healthcare Information: Communicating with Bilingual Users. *User Experience Magazine* 9.4: 22–24.
- Sapienza, Filipp. 2001. Nurturing Translocal Communication: Russian Immigrants on the World Wide Web. *Technical Communication* 48.4: 435–448.
- Sapienza, Filipp. 2014. Cultural Preferences: Mexican-Americans on the Web. *User Experience Magazine* 14.4. <http://uxpamagazine.org/cultural-preferences/>.
- Sapienza, Filipp. 2015. Transnational Website Usability. *UX Matters*. www.uxmatters.com/mt/archives/2015/12/transnational-hci-understanding-immigrant-web-usage.php.
- United Nations International Migration Report. Accessed 30 November 30 2015, www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/migration/migrationreport2013/Full_Document_final.pdf#page=7.
- U.S. Department of Census (www.census.gov/population/intmigration/).