Internationalization Errors

How to Go Global Without Losing All of Your Traffic

MozCon
Virtual

Hi, I’m Jackie

I’ve been lucky to do SEO at some cool places:

- SEO Intel. Lead, Uber
- ASO and SEO Lead, Dropbox
- Sr. SEO and ASO Manager at Square

In a nutshell…internationalization boils down to :

1. Having unique URLs for all versions of content
2. Implementing hreflang between these pages
3. Truly localized content per region

What you'll walk away with:

- The right and wrongs of hreflang
- Common internationalization mistakes to avoid
- How to make a fool-proof template / IA even Googlebot can't mess up

Hreflang 101

Simple in concept, not implementation

@jackiecchu

Hreflang is simple, right? *There's documentation.*

But it's not *that* simple

John
@JohnMu

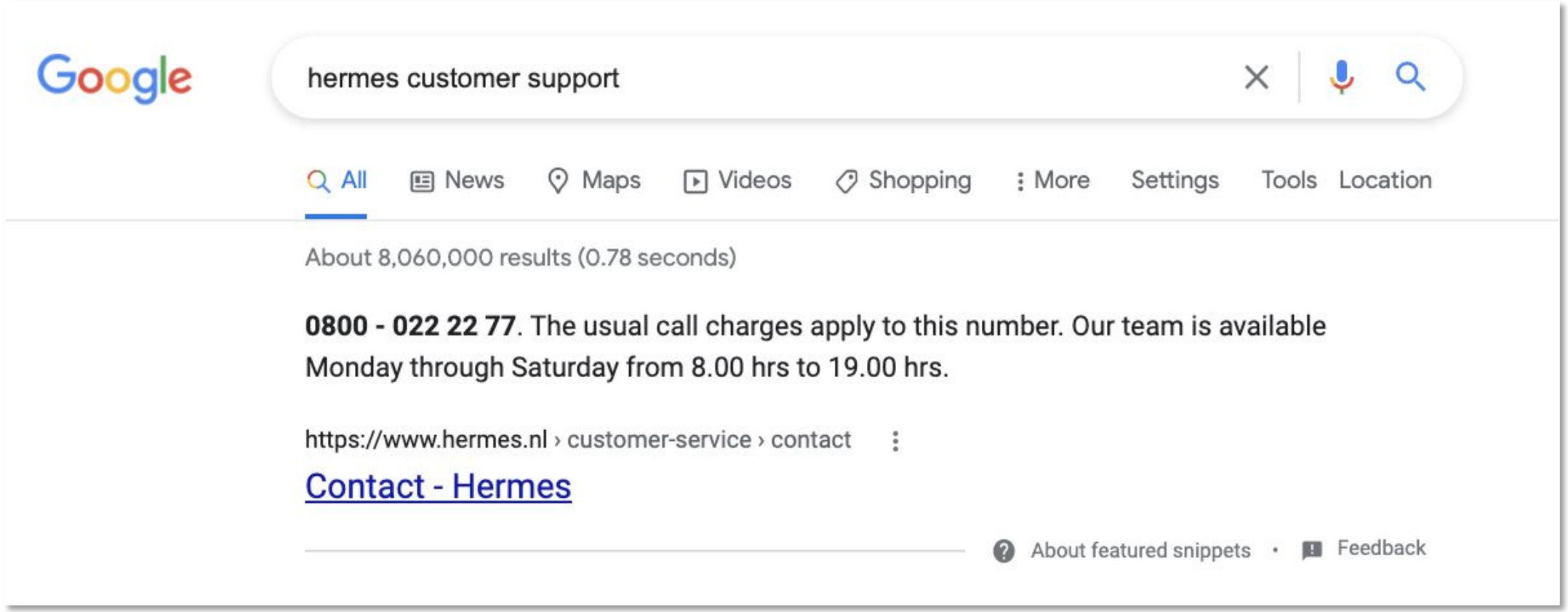
Replying to @ohgm

TBH hreflang is one of the most complex aspects of SEO (if not the most complex one). Feels as easy as a meta-tag, but it gets really hard quickly.

12:44 AM · Feb 19, 2018

73 8 Copy link to Tweet

Getting it wrong means you can't rank correctly - even for your own keywords



The Basics of Hreflang

What is hreflang?

The rel="alternate" hreflang="x" link attribute is a HTML meta element. **Hreflang specifies the language and *optional* geographic restrictions** for a document.

Hreflang basics

- **WHAT:** Implement country + lang targeting, or lang only
- **HOW:** Reciprocal links, self-referencing canonical, self-referential hreflang to themselves
- **WHERE:** Can implement in the http headers, on page in the <head> or sitemap (I prefer on page)

So what does the “ideal” hreflang implementation look like? 🤔

Ideal hreflang, for Canadian English

Country + Lang

<link rel="alternate" **hreflang= "en-ca"**
href=**"https://yoursitee.com/ca/en/"** />

Country + Lang or Lang only?
Language is non-optional

Example	Hreflang Example
yoursite.com/ca/en/	hreflang=en-ca""
yoursite.com/	hreflang="en"
yoursite.com/ca/	hreflang="ca" can't be only country

Not every site needs to do country targeting, for example:

- Global SaaS sites where there's no difference in features between countries
- Companies where you don’t have the bandwidth to differentiate content

Test your hreflang implementation with the following tools:

- Screaming Frog – to check for errors
- Search Console – international targeting report and for geo targeting
- Lighthouse – to check if Google could pick up hreflangs
- And more...

In summary, hreflang should have:

- Consistent and standard URL patterns
- All URLs in the set must canonicalize to themselves, point to each other and have a reciprocal url
- Target either country + lang *or* a global language page

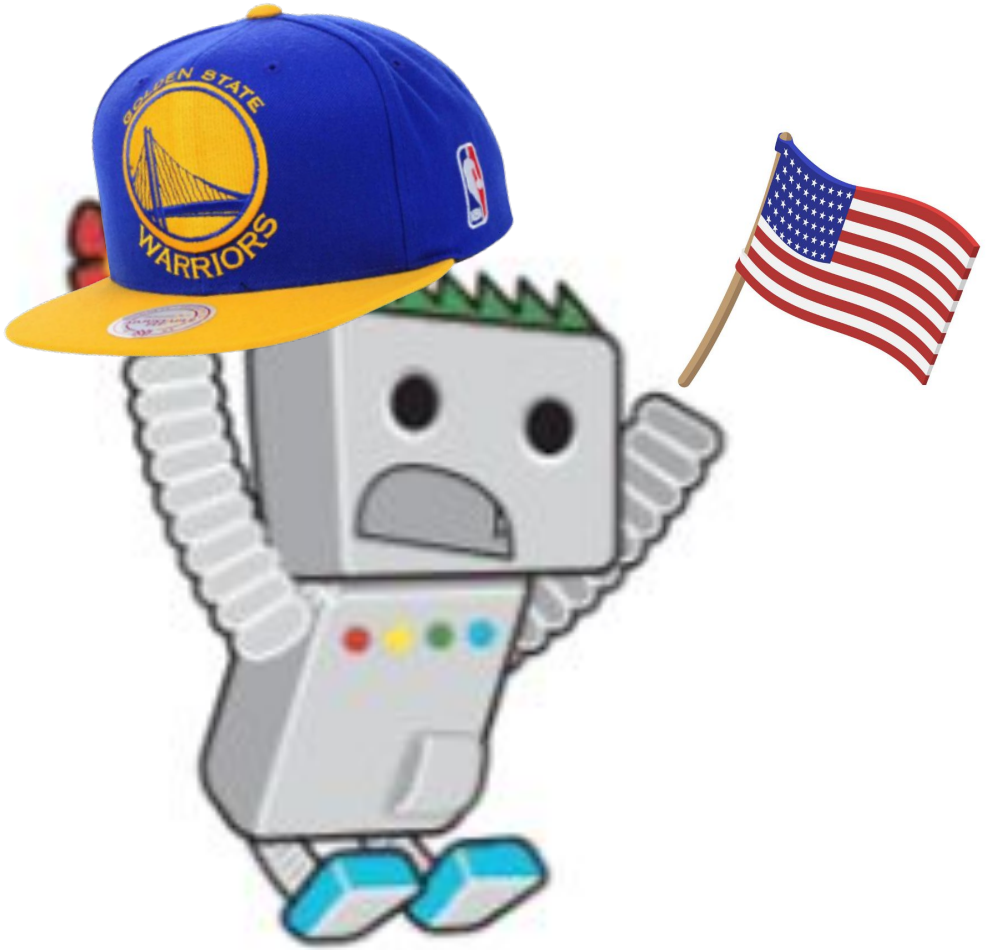
Common Internationalization Mistakes to Avoid

Mistake #1: No unique URLs for content

```
<link rel="alternate" href="https://ca.nextdoor.com/" hreflang="en-ca" />
<link rel="alternate" href="https://ca.nextdoor.com/" hreflang="fr-ca" />
```

Mistake #1: No unique URLs for content

Googlebot comes
from the US
99.9999%
of the time



Mistake #2: Using 4 letter lang codes

Often caused by micro-optimization or automation errors

```
href="https://stripe.com/fr-ca-ae" hreflang="fr-ca-AE">
```

Mistake #2: Using 4 letter lang codes Chinese is the exception

Simplified

Used in China, Singapore

Traditional

Used in HK,TW,MO

Chinese is the only recognized 4 letter language code

zh-Hans

Simplified

Used in China

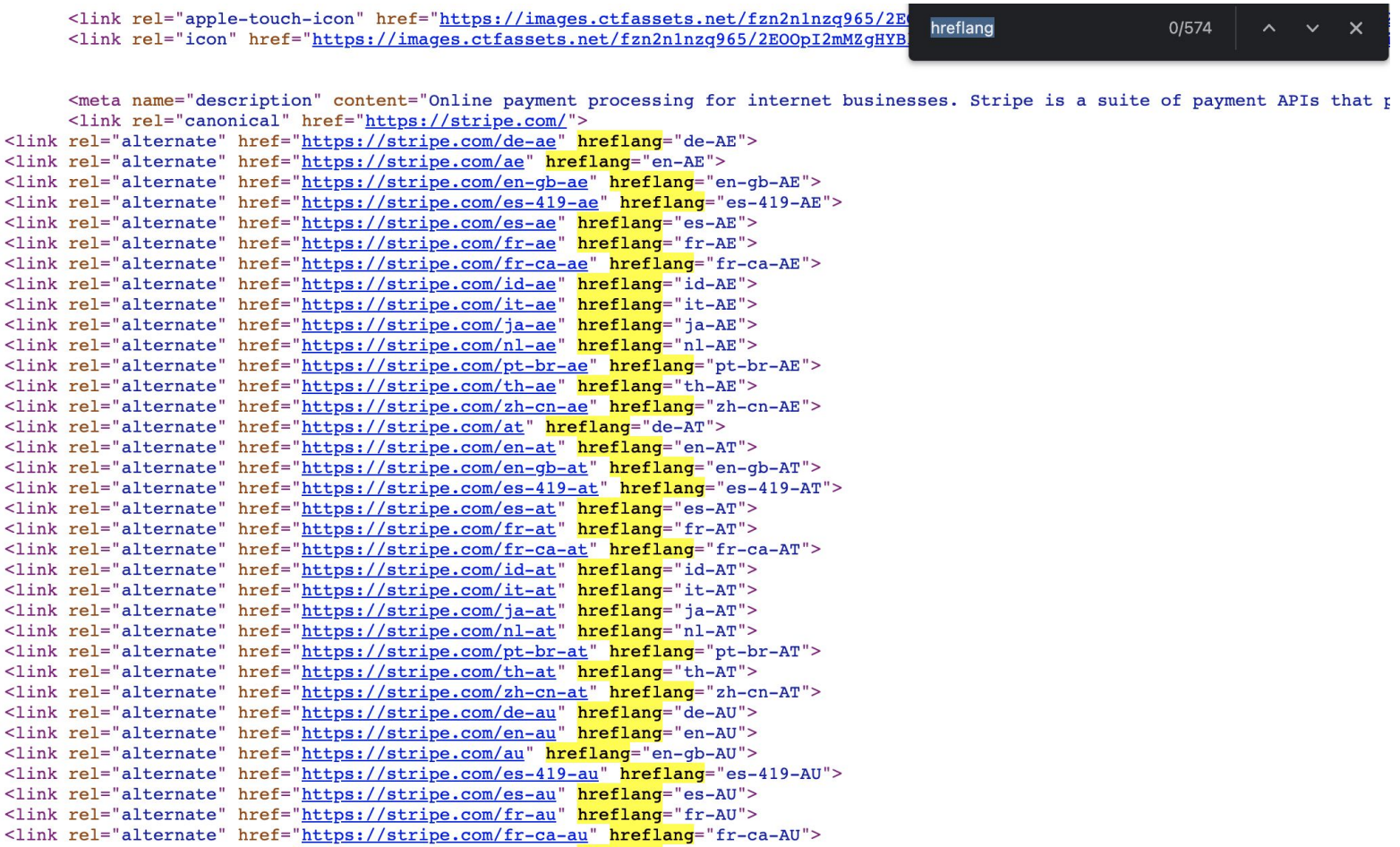
Singapore

zh-Hant

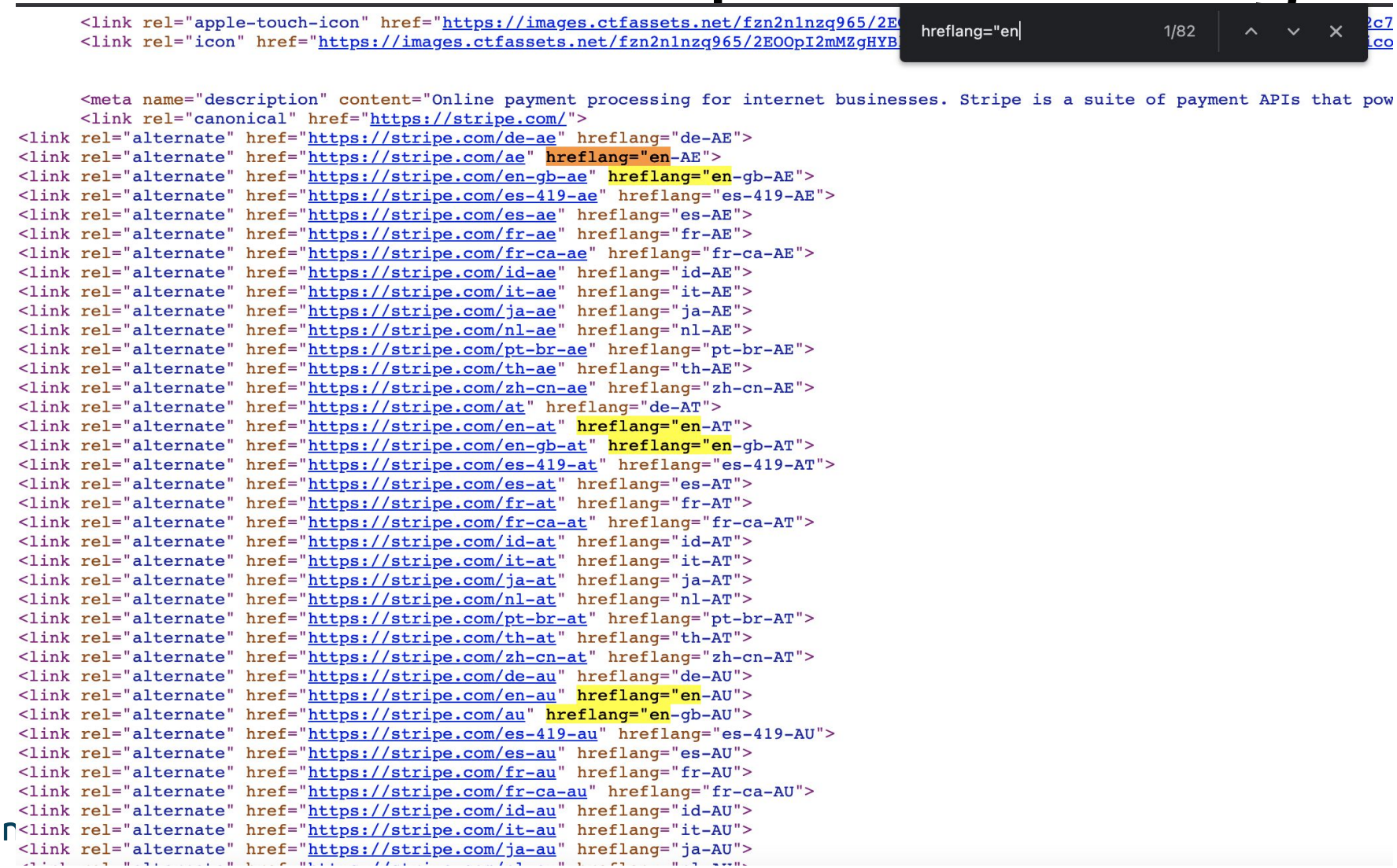
Traditional

Used in HK,TW,MO

Mistake #3: Creating duplicate content issue by not differentiating content



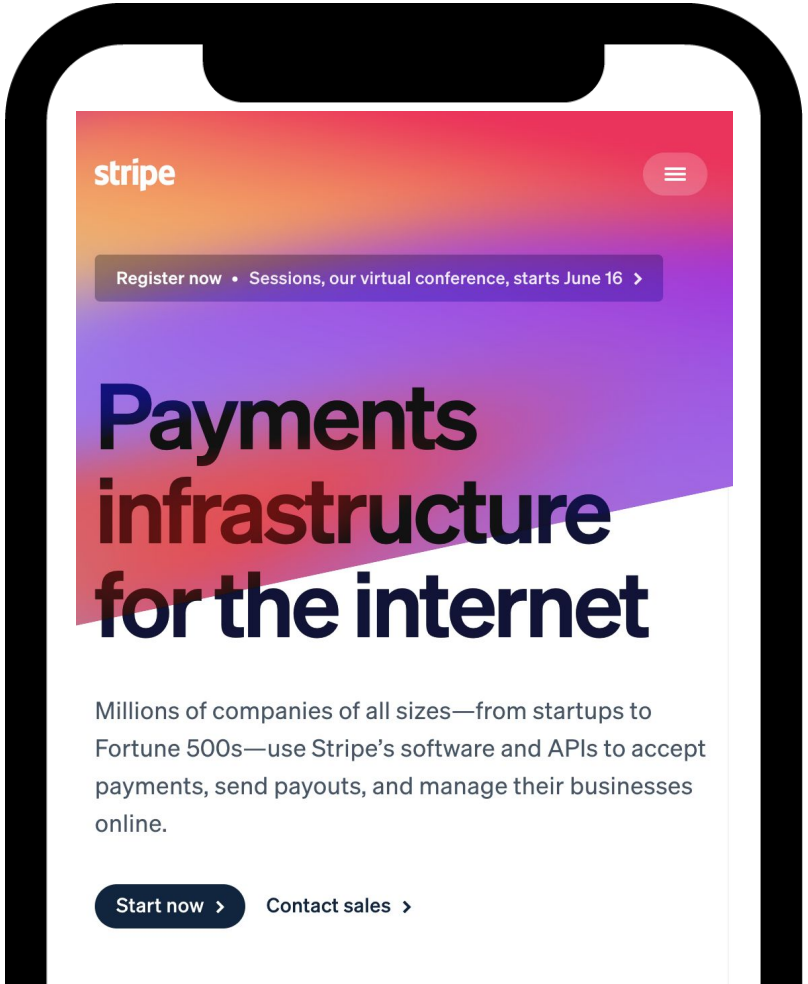
82 of these 854 templates are English

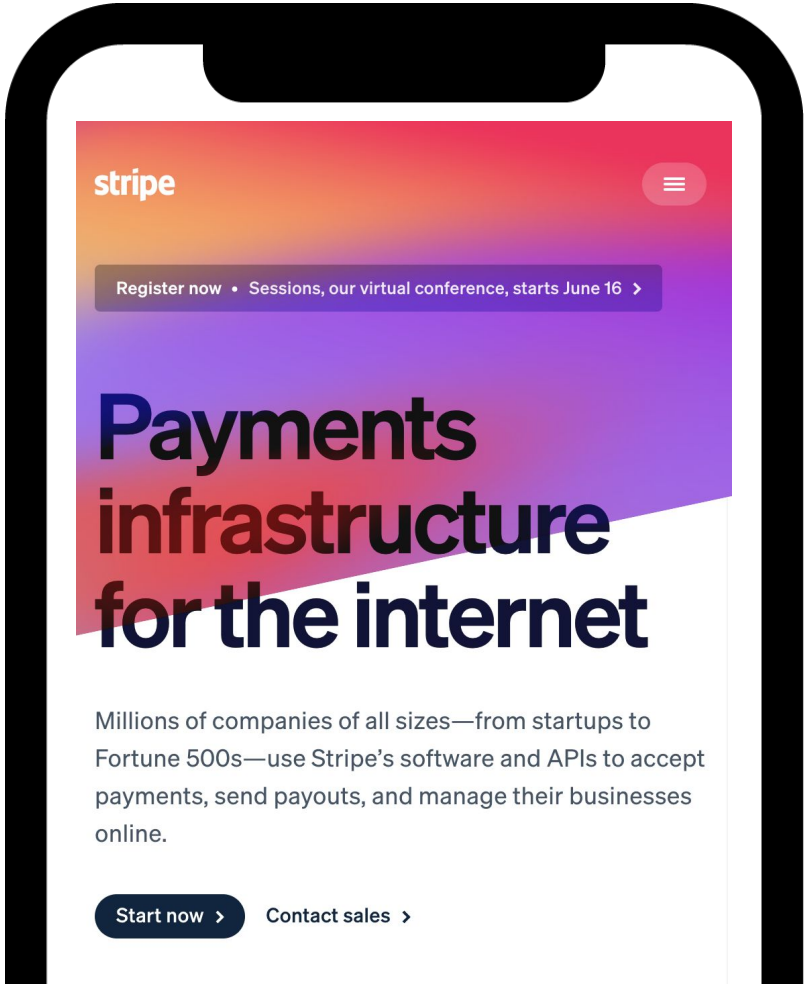


Mistake #4: Optimizing for flavors of languages

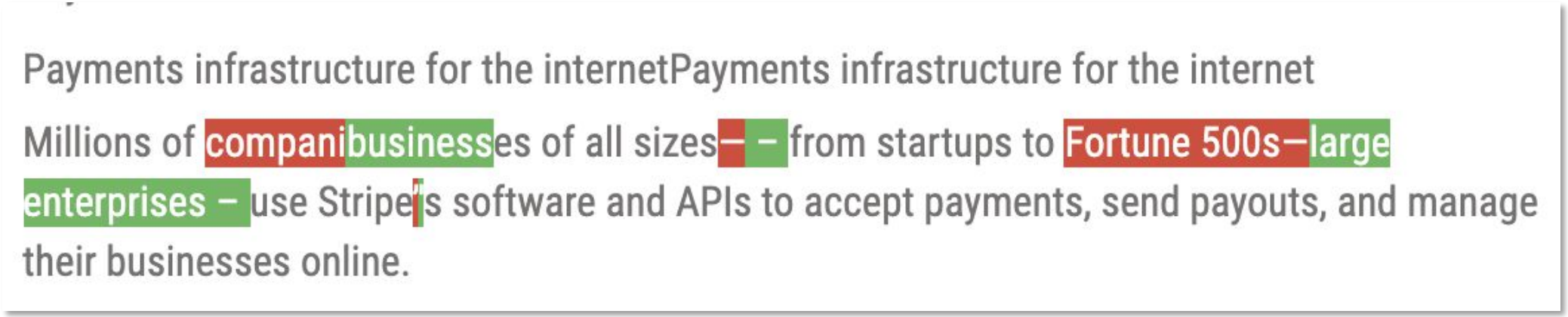
```
href="https://stripe.com/en-nz" hreflang="en-NZ">
href="https://stripe.com/nz" hreflang="en-gb-NZ">
```

And not making pages that are materially different. Let's compare US to AE:

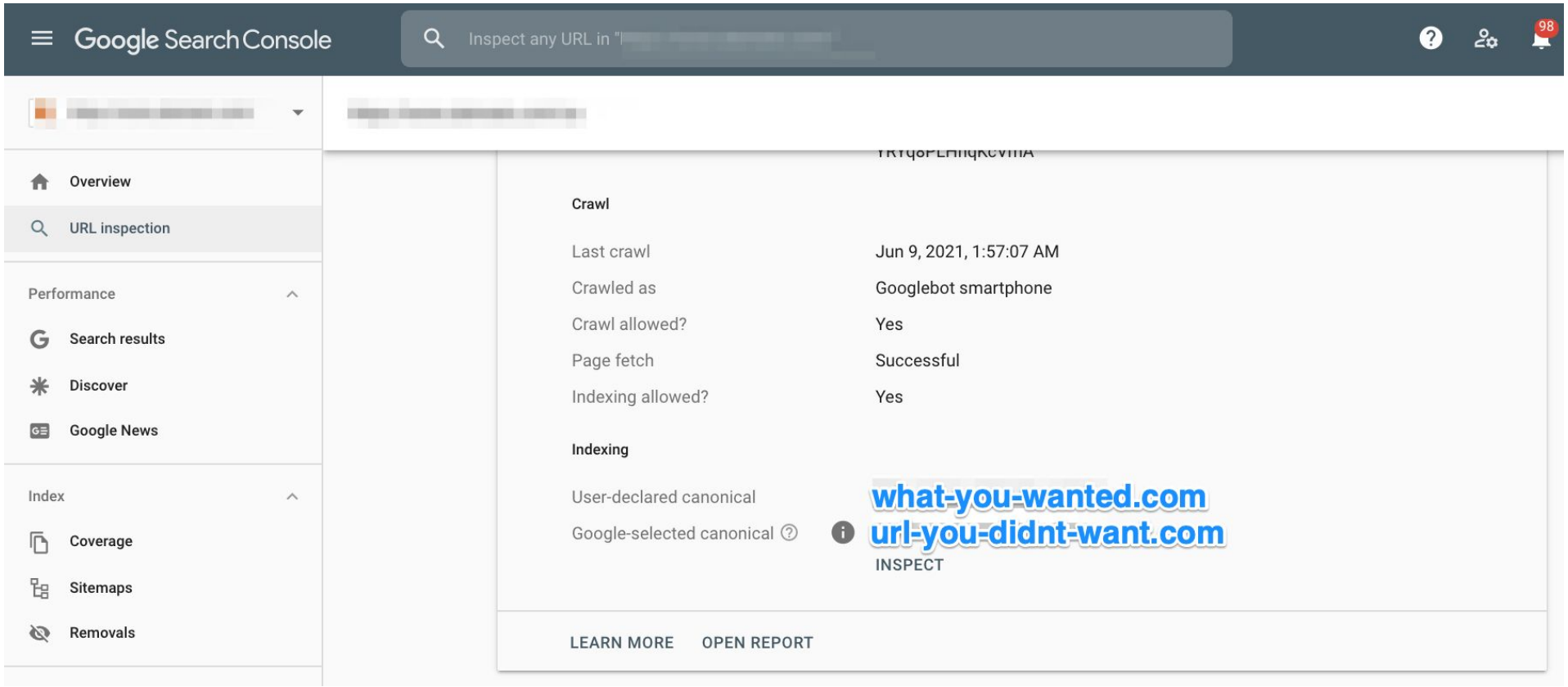




The differences are not compelling – about 96% similar

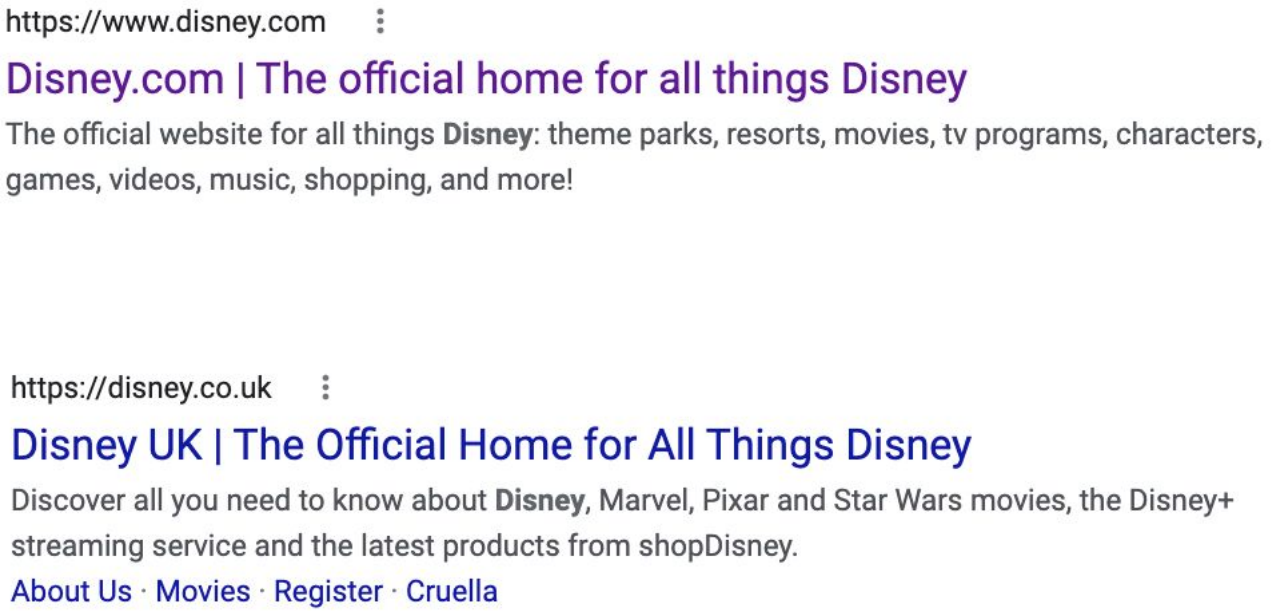


You'll know you have this problem when Google ignores your canonical in GSC



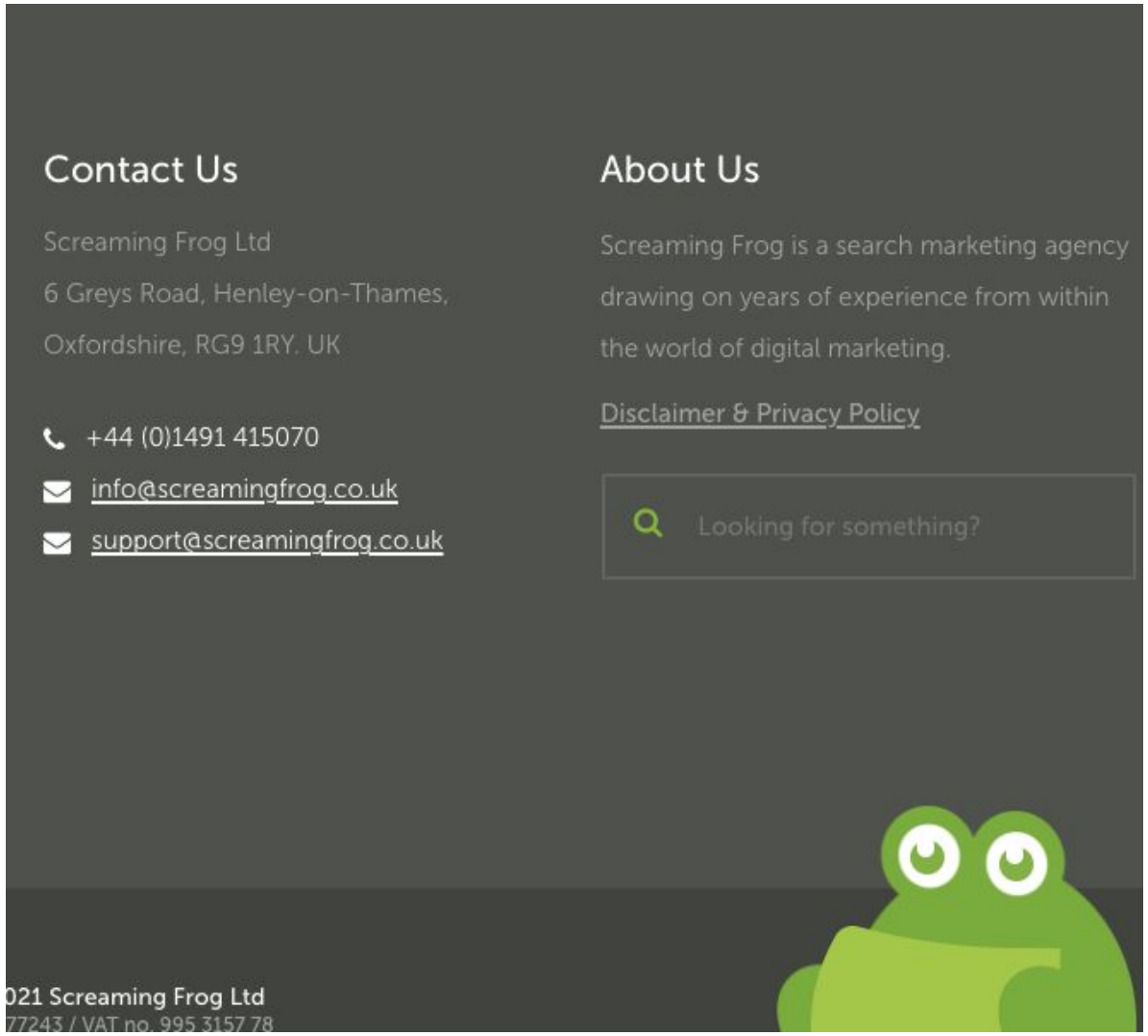
Ideas to truly differentiate content

Append Country Name to Title Tags

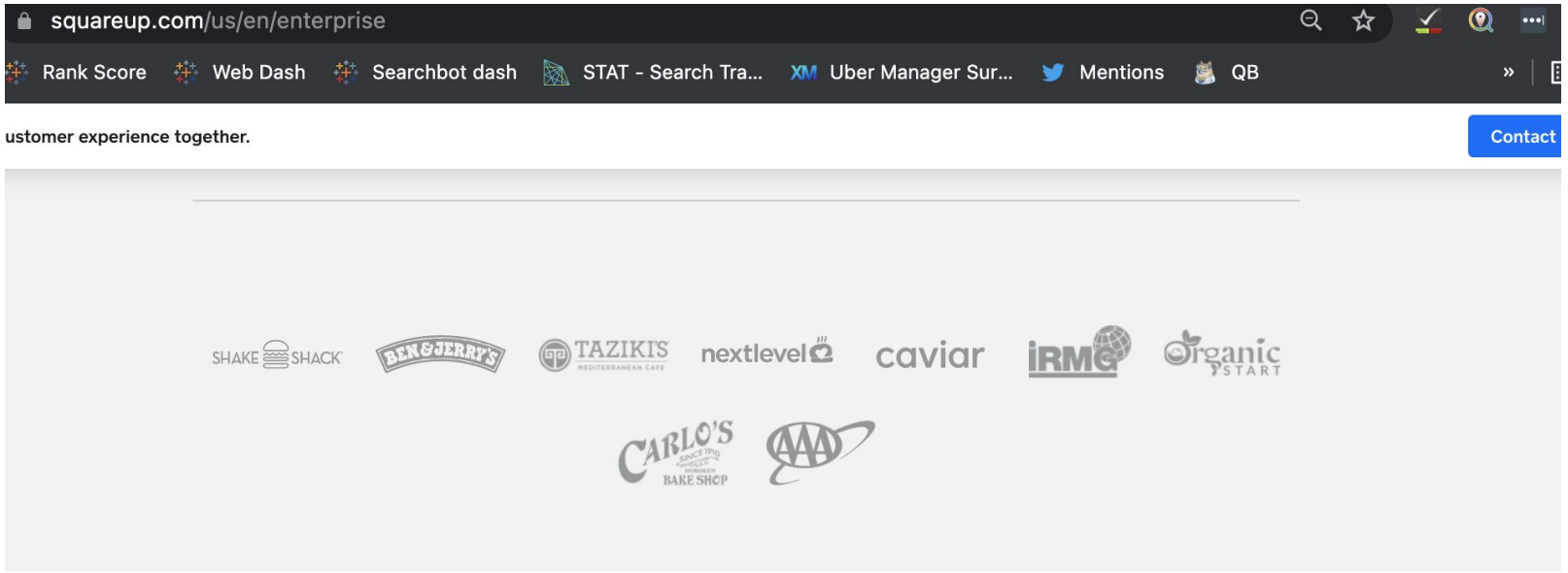


Add your NAP (Name, Address, Phone) to the footer

Don’t forget social handles
Also add local handles to social links, if available



Use local vendors and reviews to enrich the page



Powerful data to optimize sales

Data is the currency of great commerce experiences. And integrated systems yield robust data and rich customer insights that support smarter strategies that fuel your business growth.

Our platform helps you connect the dots across all your customer touchpoints,

The Perfect International IA

Even Googlebot can’t screw up

ccTLD, Subfolder or Subdomain?

Option for URLs	Example
ccTLD	**yourwebsite.ca**
Subfolder	**yourwebsite.com/ca/en**
Subdomain	**ca.yourwebsite.com**

ccTLD, Subfolder or Subdomain?

What?	Pros	Cons
ccTLD	- The domain feels the most endemic to the user	- Expensive to deploy and maintain - Also treated as its own domain, could take awhile to grow
Subfolder	- Easiest implementation: one GSC set up, etc. - Doesn't require separate domain registration	- Inability to fully localize URLs, could hurt CTR in low-trust countries
Subdomain	- Also treated as its own domain - Doesn't require separate domain registration	- Expensive to deploy and maintain - Also treated as its own domain, could take a while to grow

Subfolders are usually the Goldilocks solutions

- Easier to implement
- Only one service to maintain
- Main tradeoff is sometimes the URLs don’t feel endemic to the country

Ideal URL structure

- Leads with country folder in slug, if there is one
- Uses ISO codes and follows web norms
- Hyphens, not underscores

Lead with country in the slug

yoursite.com/ca/en/

Country-first!

One or two folders is all good

yoursite.com/ca/en/ OR
yoursite.com/ca-en/

Use a hyphen, not underscore!

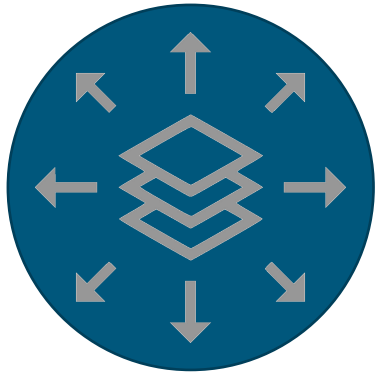
If using language-only targeting, add a subfolder ahead of language

yoursite.com/lang/en
yoursite.com/lang/fr

Use ISO - avoid uncommon patterns

```
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-IE" href="https://www.adobe.com/ie/"/>
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="ar-kw" href="https://www.adobe.com/mena_ar/"/>
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-IL" href="https://www.adobe.com/il_en/"/>
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-IN" href="https://www.adobe.com/in/"/>
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-AE" href="https://www.adobe.com/ae_en/"/>
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-ZA" href="https://www.adobe.com/africa/"/>
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="no-NO" href="https://www.adobe.com/no/"/>
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-am" href="https://www.adobe.com/cis_en/"/>
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="nl-NL" href="https://www.adobe.com/nl/"/>
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="ru-uz" href="https://www.adobe.com/cis_ru/"/>
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-AU" href="https://www.adobe.com/au/"/>
```

Delivery and distribution



Use a CDN

This is critical for a performant global website

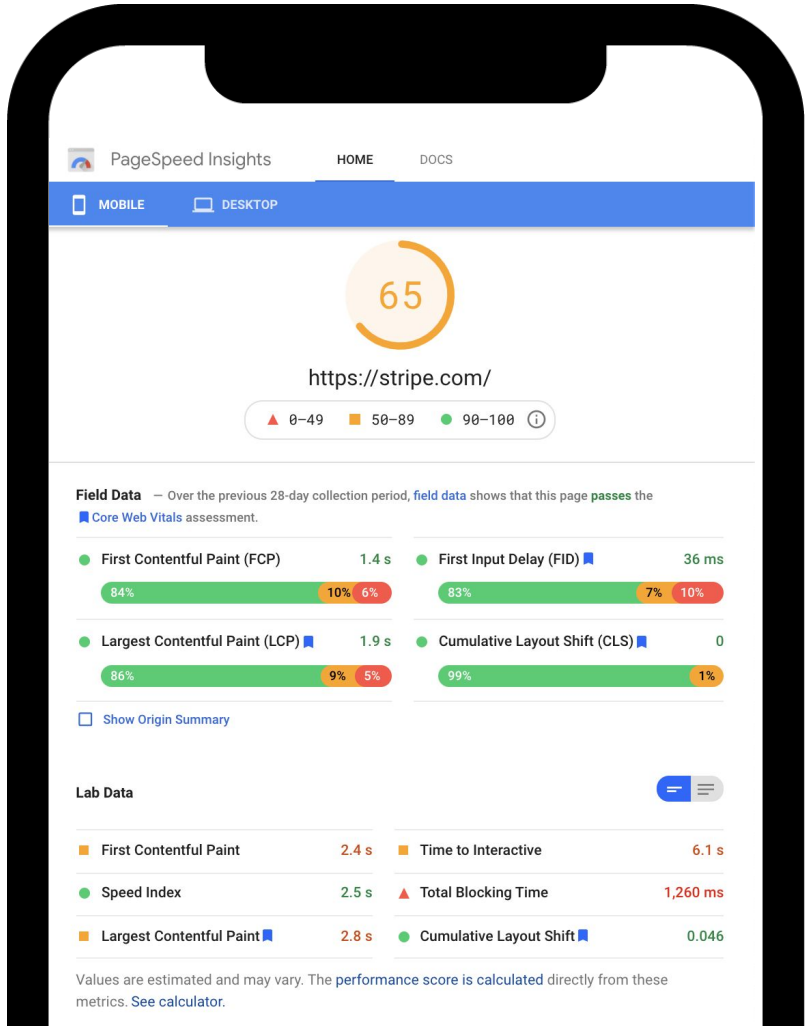
Mobile-first

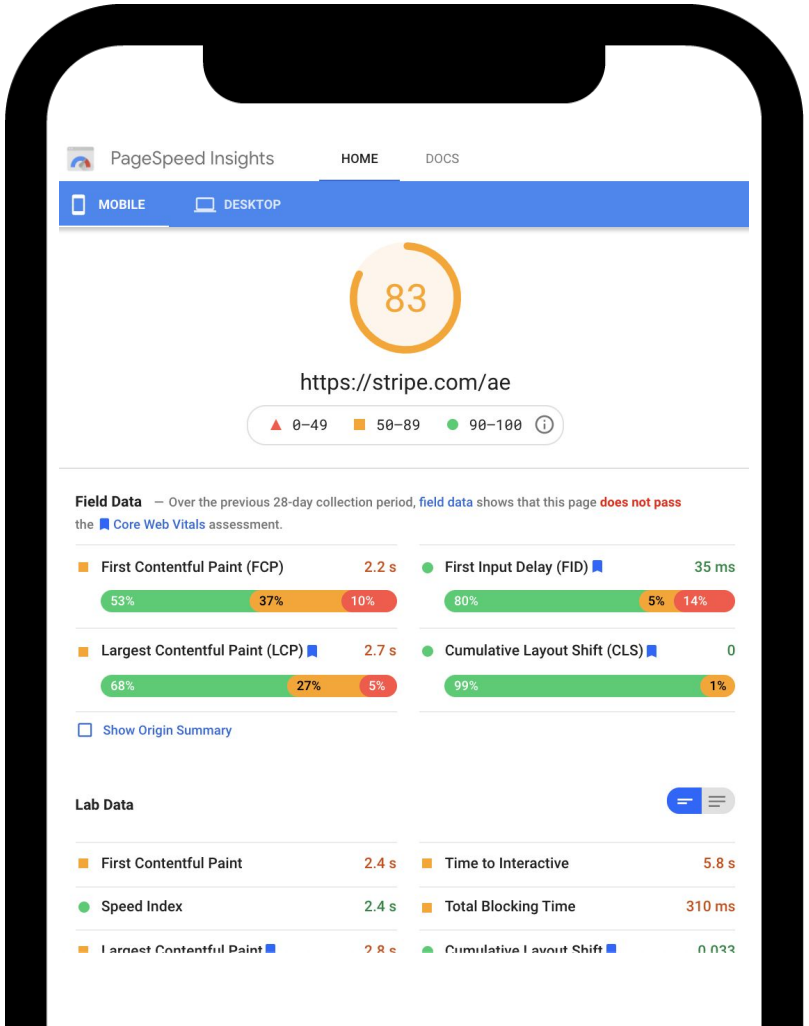
And don’t discount the prevalence of Android outside of the USA

Optimize for your slowest market

Your speed is often determined by your floor, not your ceiling

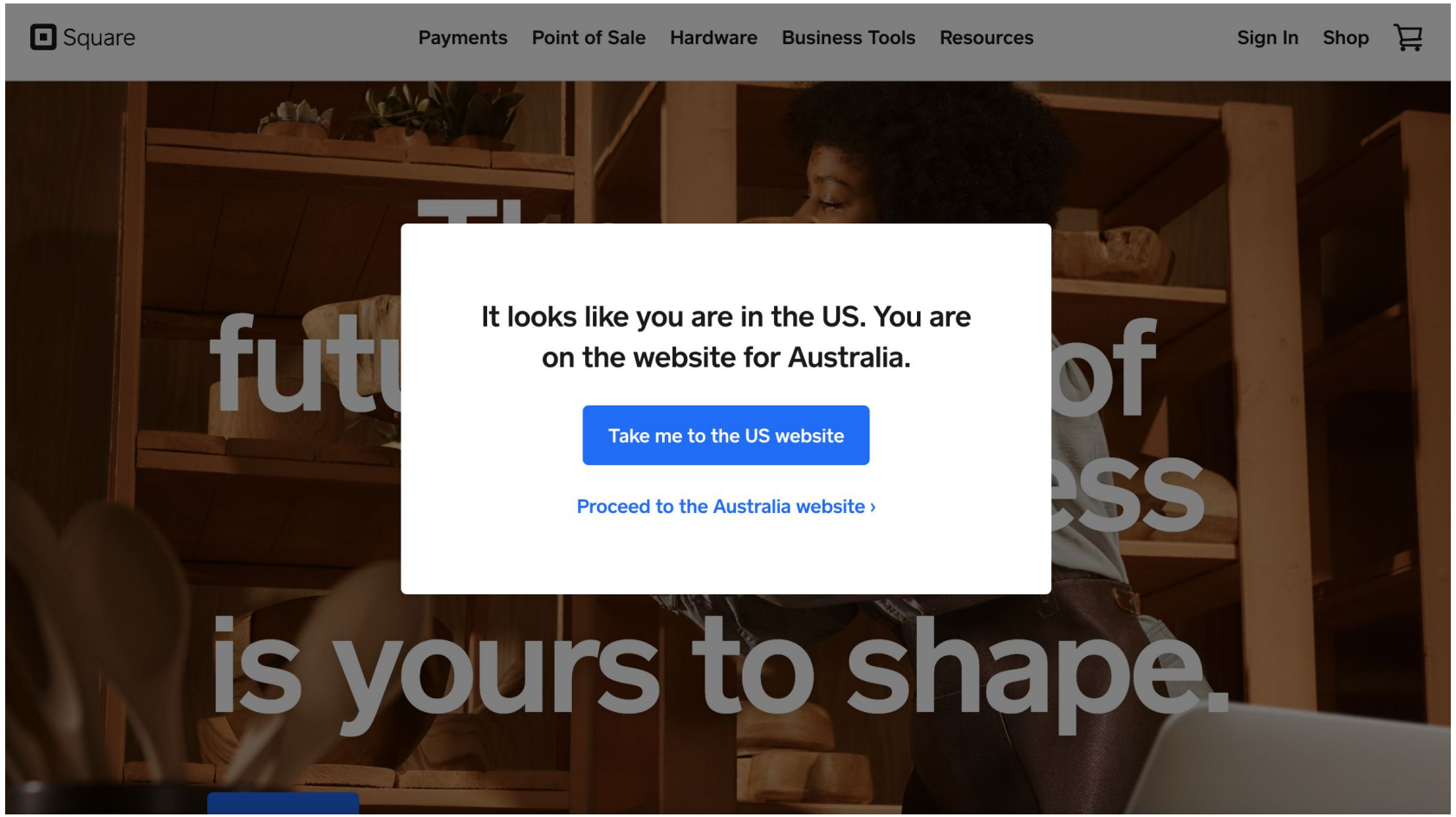
Compare the same page type in 2 geos



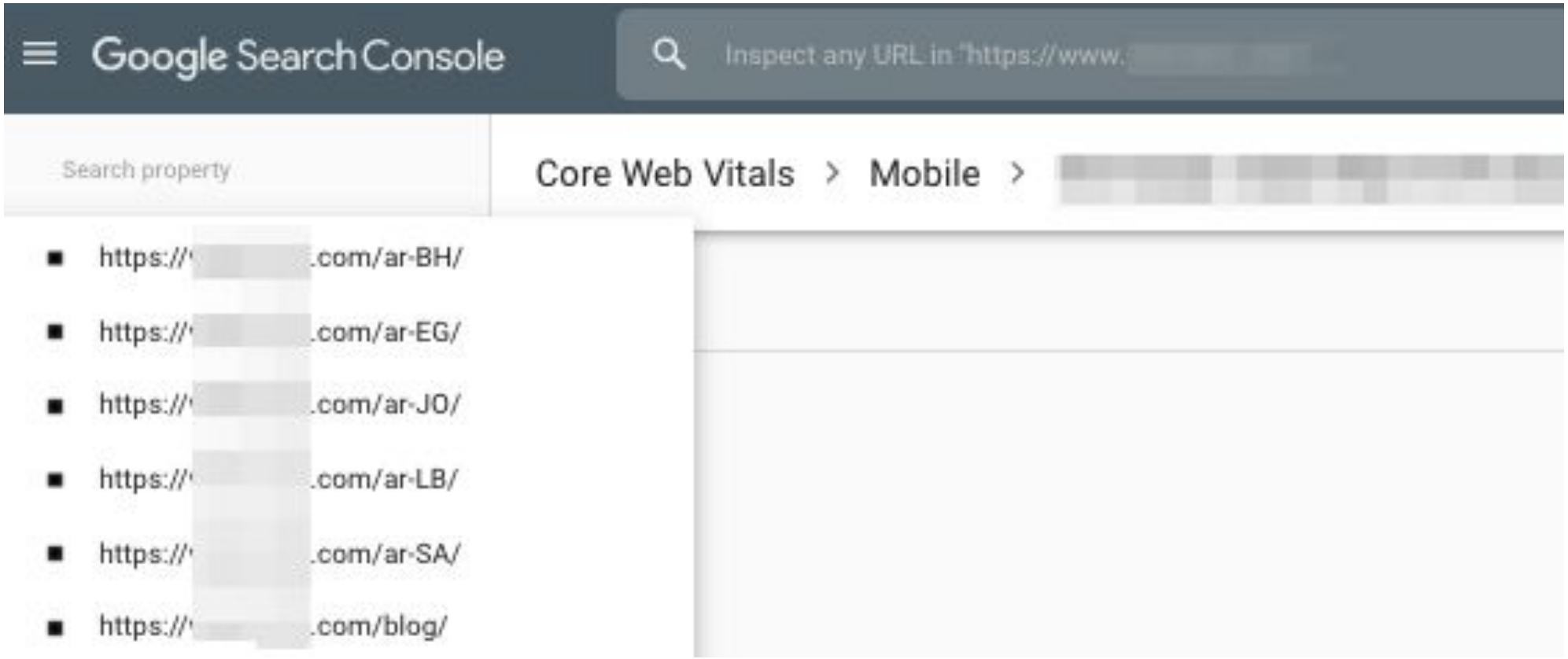


MozCon Virtual

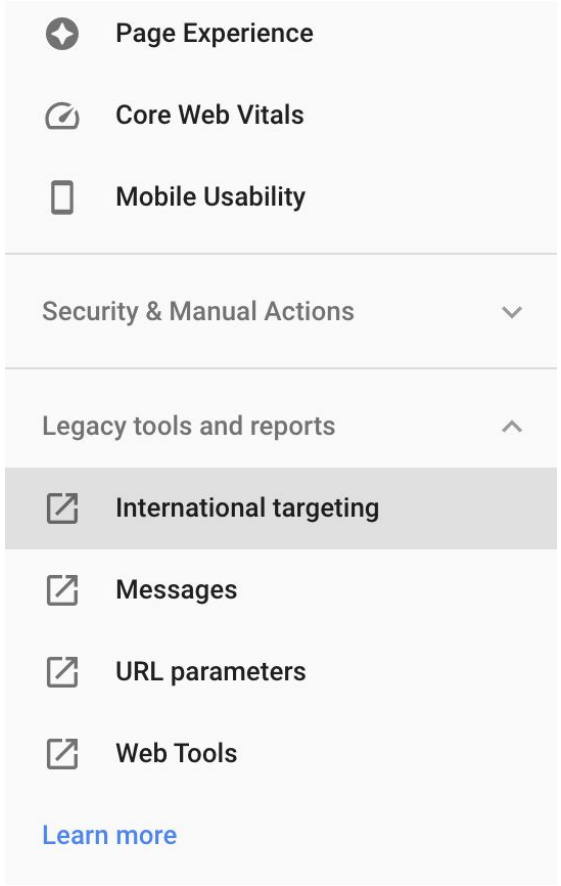
Suggest a redirect based on IP- don’t force it

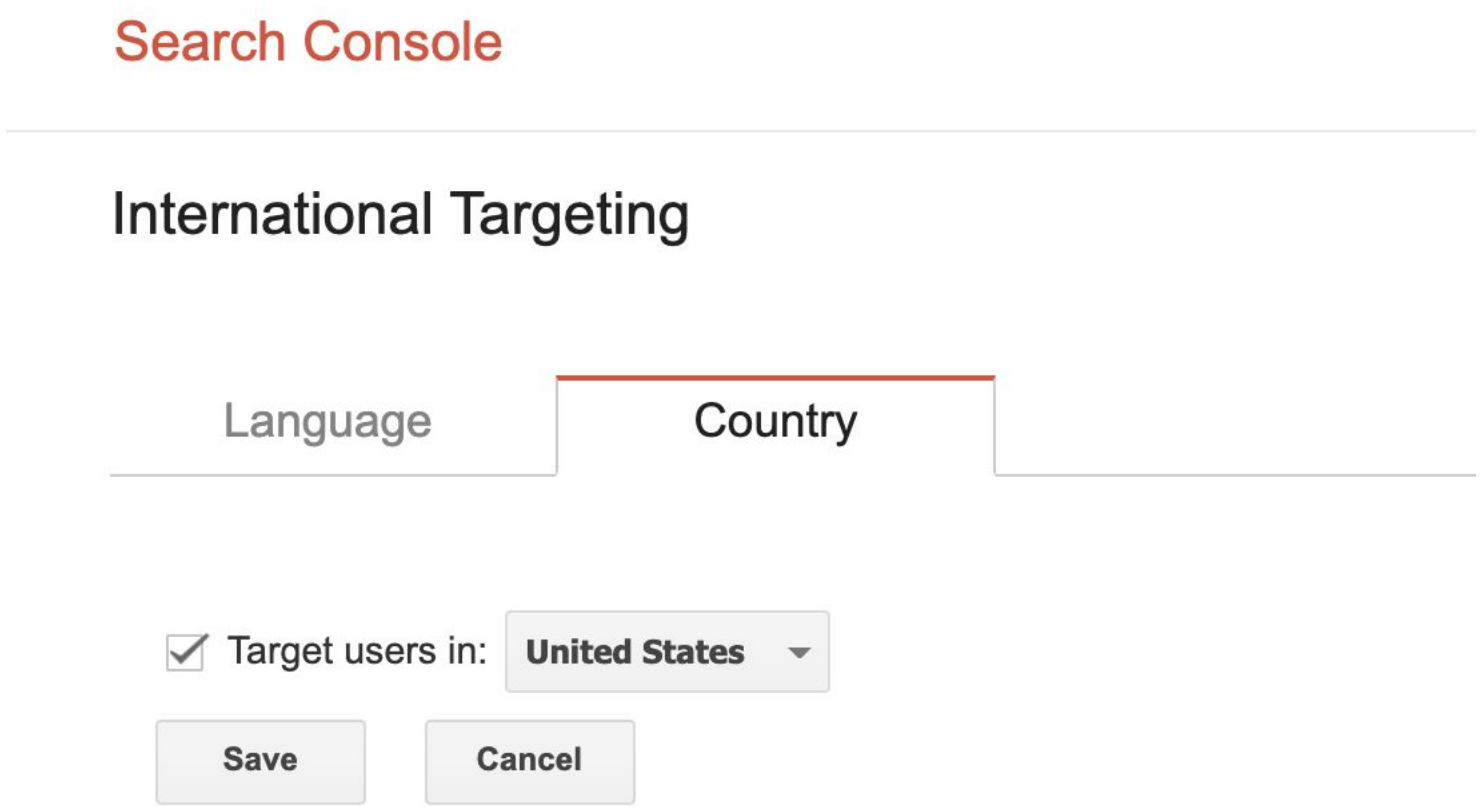


Lastly, add all country folders to GSC



And target these in Search Console





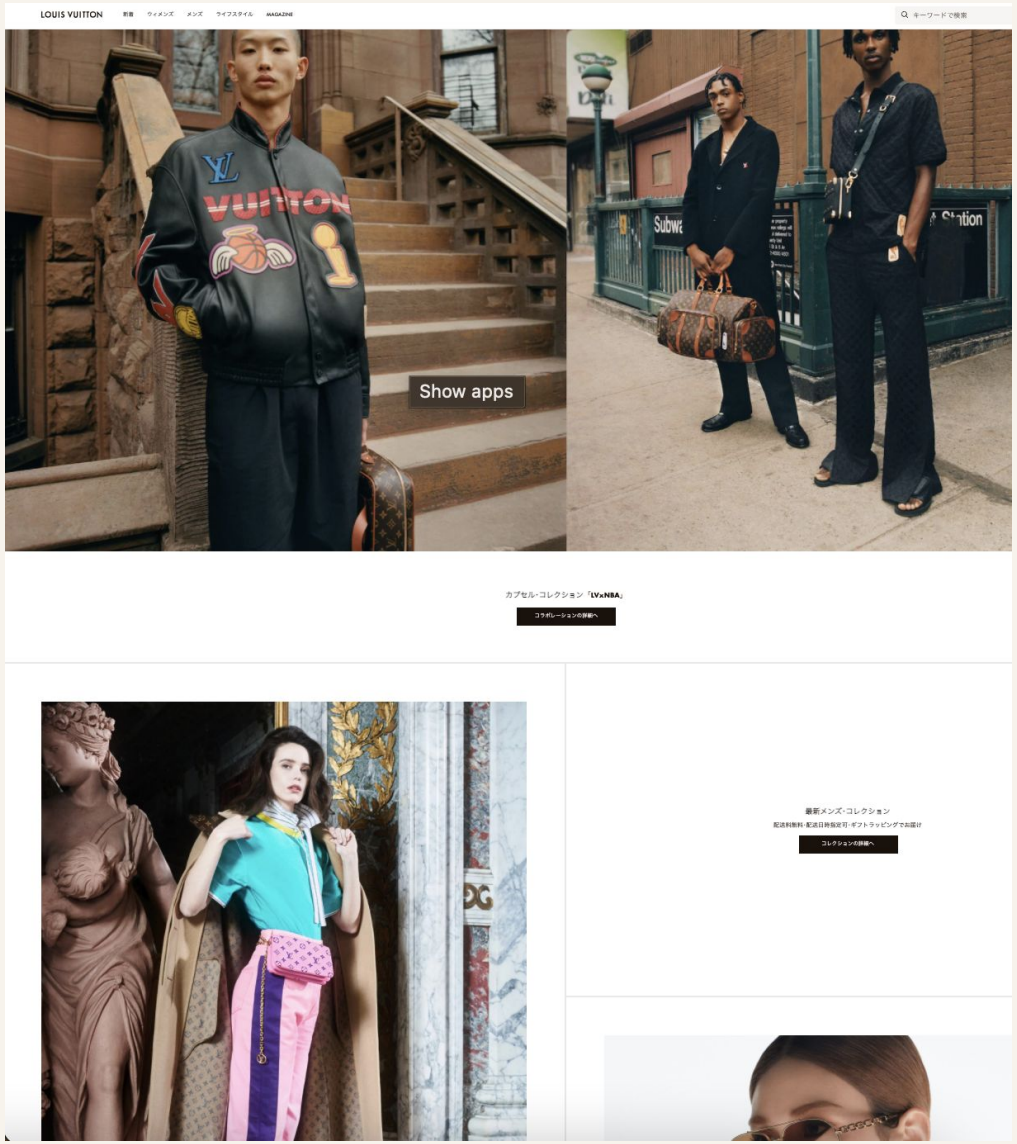
There’s a lot to recap, including:

- ❑ Are you a country-agnostic or country-specific site?
- ❑ Do your URLs use ISO codes for language and start with country in slug (if applicable?)
- ❑ Do your URLs use hyphens?
- ❑ Etc..

Download the checklist at bit.ly/jackiemozcon

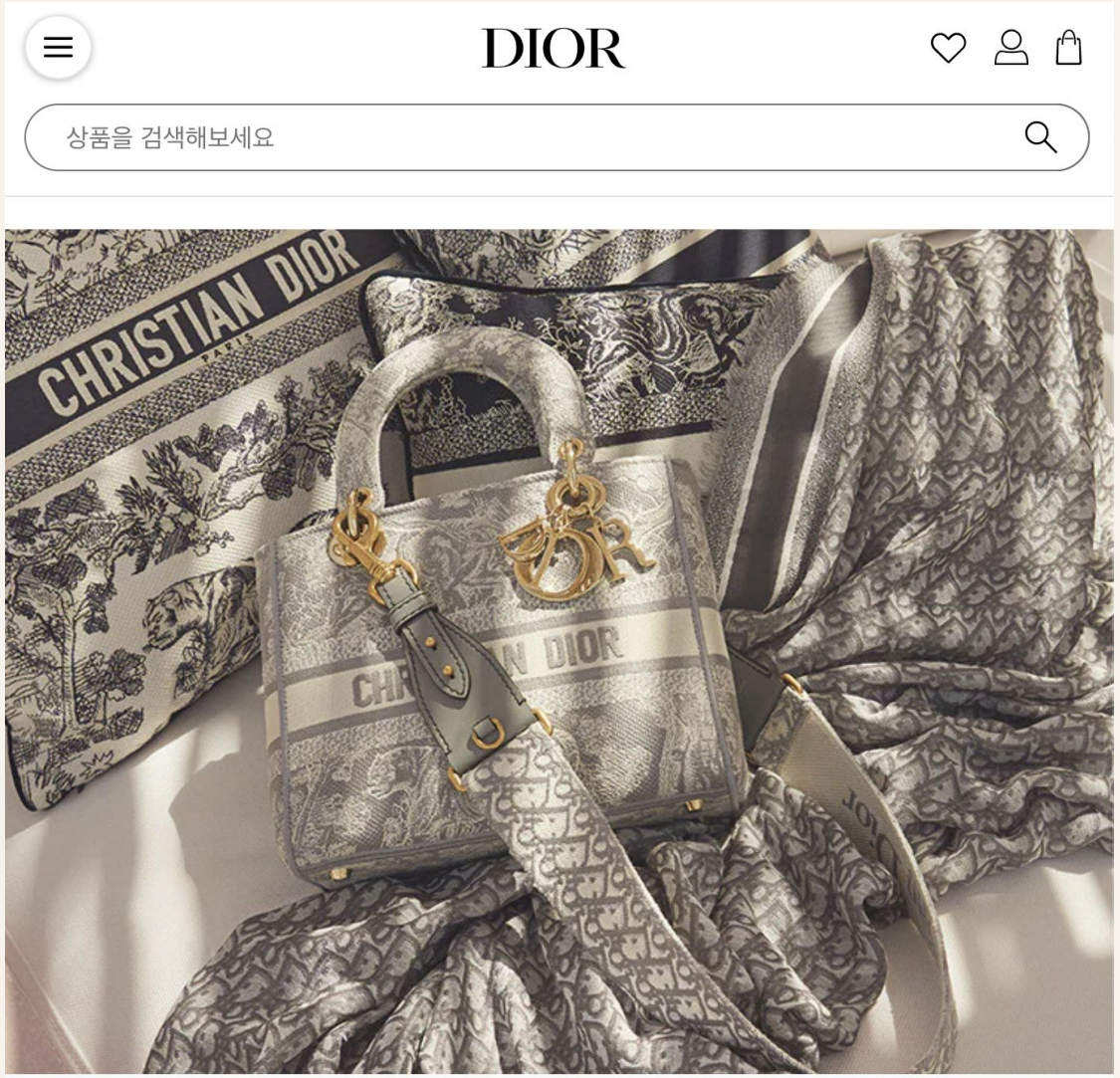
To see all this information you learned in one place!

Some last tips



Update and localize photos - especially people!

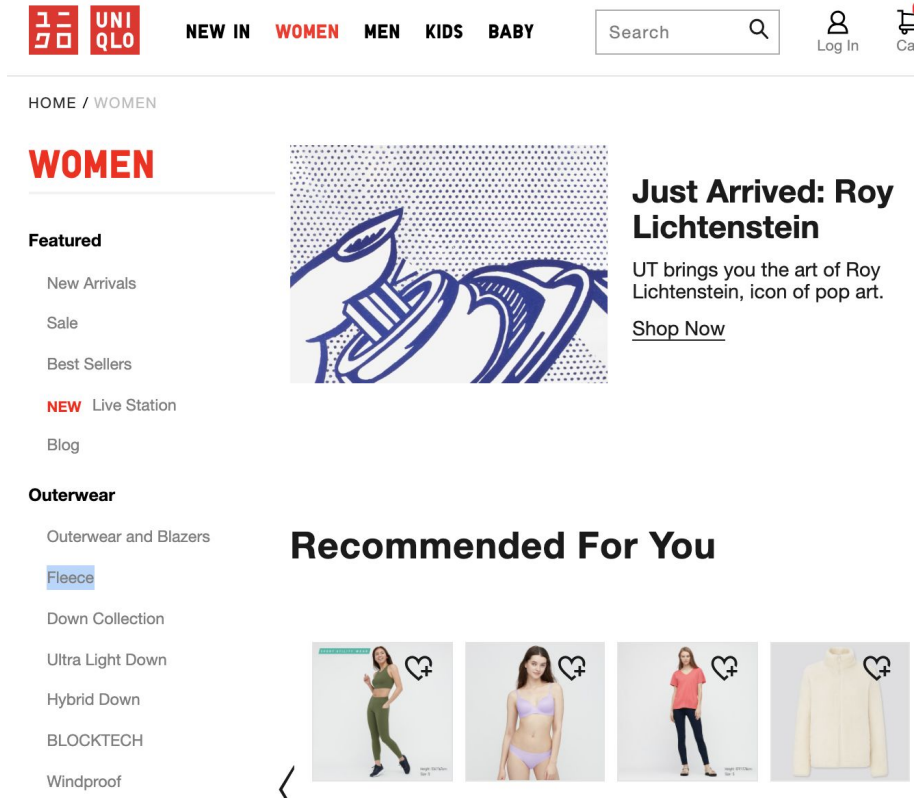
This improves perception and provides an extra opportunity to localize content



Or just be DIOR

Decline to show anyone at all!

And don’t be afraid of different layouts



Or unique trends in SERPs

Extra credit: translate URLs if possible

And my most favorite tip

Google Sheets translation hack

= googletranslate(A2,“en”,“es”)

origin destination

Google Sheets translation hack

Keyword	Destination Language	End Keywords
Dog	ES	Perro
Cat	ES	
Mom	ES	

Thank You!

@jackiecchu