



BLUE ARRAY WHITEPAPER

# INTERNATIONAL SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMISATION (SEO)

Growing an overseas audience

# INTRODUCTION

This white paper is for UK businesses wanting to launch and/or optimise their web presence internationally. It focuses on SEO advice only.

The author of this white paper is Blue Array ([bluearray.co.uk](http://bluearray.co.uk)).

Blue Array is the UK's foremost pure-play SEO agency with clients such as The Post Office, Simply Business and Moonpig, to name just a few.

Themes in this document:

- ✓ **STRUCTURE YOUR SITE FOR INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES**
- ✓ **TAG INTERNATIONAL VERSIONS OF PAGES**
- ✓ **ACTIVELY LINK INTERNATIONAL PAGES TOGETHER**
- ✓ **AVOID AUTOMATIC GEO-REDIRECTION**
- ✓ **REINFORCE INTERNATIONAL TARGETING IN GOOGLE SEARCH CONSOLE**
- ✓ **SUMMARY**



# STRUCTURE YOUR SITE FOR INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES

A central decision is whether to use Country Code Top Level Domains (ccTLDs), subdomains or subfolders for an international web presence.

Example ccTLD	Example subdomain	Example subfolder
website.fr	website.com	website.com
website.de	de.website.com	website.com/de
website.en	uk.website.com	website.com/uk

ccTLDs are the least attractive for SEO. Essentially these are new domains and often require separate hosting and platforms - increasing the effort needed to maintain and grow content on these.

Between the remaining two options, there's disagreement in the industry, though **Blue Array always recommend subfolders** (also known as subdirectories).

Why? Subfolders/subdirectories are:

- ✓ often the easiest to implement and maintain (they use your existing website)
- ✓ likely to inherit the **PageRank** of your existing domain - meaning you may see results of optimised content ranking faster.

Sites which use subfolders effectively for international SEO:

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk>

<https://www.salesforce.com/uk/>

<https://www.worldfirst.com/uk/>

<https://www.bluenile.com/uk/>

<https://www.apple.com/uk/>

<https://www.etsy.com/uk/>

# TAG INTERNATIONAL VERSIONS OF PAGES

This section mostly focuses on the code snippet `Rel="Alternate" Hreflang="x"` (often known just as hreflang). It will look technical to a non-specialist, but it's important and the principles are easy to understand.

Skip to:

- [Hreflang: what is it, and what to do](#)
- [Hreflang: how to do it](#)
- [So, what about Bing?](#)



## HREFLANG: WHAT IS IT, AND WHAT TO DO

Hreflang tags are standard, page-level HTML tags that communicate what country and language your content was published for. Used properly, they can generate better quality engagement with a site. Searchers are served the most appropriate site version in search engine results pages meaning they are more likely to click through from search results, less likely to bounce off, and more likely to convert.

For example: if you publish your English language home page in German, use the tag `Rel="Alternate" Hreflang="de"` ("de" element for language "Deutsch").

It's possible to localise further by adding specific extra characters. For example `Rel="Alternate" Hreflang="de-de"` and `Rel="Alternate" Hreflang="de-at"` indicate German language versions which target specifically Germany and Austria respectively

Language-country pairs in a hreflang tag are a good option if physical presence or web content is discernibly different in territories with a common language. Otherwise a language-only tag may be more useful.

This is because extra elements like `"de-de"/"de-at"` indicate content aimed at searchers in Germany/Austria; but not Switzerland, Luxembourg, or other German-speaking territories. Multiple language-territory tags to the same page can seem deceitful or spammy.

Make a judgement on which is right based on the realities of your business, or use language-only and language-country tags in combination.

This is an important detail to labour to digital teams. Websites should use either or both of:

- ✓ `Rel="Alternate" Hreflang="language"`
- ✓ `Rel="Alternate" Hreflang="language-country"`

Other combinations are not valid, and it's easy to confuse language and country codes. This is a common mistake. The codes are ISO standards and you can find complete lists by searching Wikipedia for:

- ✓ [list of ISO 639-1 codes](#) (language codes)
- ✓ [ISO 3166-1 alpha-2](#) (country codes)

If you lack resource to create and maintain a suite of targeted international pages, hreflang tags can contain `"x-default"` in place of a language element. This indicates the most appropriate (and sometimes only) version of a page when searcher language preferences can't be met.

It's also a tacit suggestion that content isn't targeting particular groups. So in short, the tag `rel="alternate" hreflang="x-default"` shouldn't replace specific, appropriate, language or language-country tagging. It should supplement it.

The URLs you can use in hreflang tags can be on the same domain, a subdomain or a completely different domain.

Alternative language only	Alternative language-country pairs
German language, no specific country: <code>Rel="Alternate" Hreflang="de"</code>	German language, specifically Germany: <code>Rel="Alternate" Hreflang="de-de"</code>
English language, no specific country: <code>Rel="Alternate" Hreflang="en"</code>	German language, specifically Austria: <code>Rel="Alternate" Hreflang="de-at"</code>
	English language, specifically the UK: <code>Rel="Alternate" Hreflang="en-gb"</code>
	English language, specifically the US: <code>Rel="Alternate" Hreflang="en-us"</code>

## HREFLANG: HOW TO DO IT

The main ways to implement hreflang are via:

- ✓ link elements in the <head> of every page
- ✓ an XML sitemap markup
- ✓ Hreflang HTTP headers (for non-web page assets like PDF files)

Use one method only. Simply put, **the first option is the typical Blue Array way**. It's less time intensive, and the page speed latency it adds compared to the second option is minor. Exceptions to this would be very large sites - for example big ecommerce.

A second implementation tip: each language version of a page must have a hreflang tag for itself as well as all other language versions. Alongside bad country or language codes, a missing tag is one of the most common errors seen in the industry.

For accuracy, use <https://technicalseo.com/seo-tools/hreflang/>. For effectiveness, consider this quick test: adapt the string below for known language versions of a site, and input it into a Chrome browser. If the hreflang tags are effective, the correct language/language-country version should appear on the results page.

**<https://www.google.com/search? hl=languagecode &q=yourbrand &gl=countrycode>**

The string asks for a Google search of a brand, and manually specifies a language and territory preference. Google is used in this example because Bing do not use hreflang.

Finally, hreflang should only be used on [canonical URLs](#) (put simply the 'main' version of a page, not a duplicate). Duplicate content is bad for users and search engines but it exists everywhere out of necessity - for example on http and https versions of the same page. Rel=canonical tags can communicate the relationship between the two so one gives way to the other and they don't compete for ranking. Hreflang tags on non-canonical urls communicate confused logic.

You can test both the **accuracy** and **effectiveness** of your hreflang implementation.



## SO WHAT ABOUT BING?

Google are the leading search engine worldwide, fulfilling around 90% of queries. Microsoft's Bing are second, globally. Their share of search in the UK is larger than their global average, but you may still want to take them into account. Instead of using hreflang, they rely on a different tag implemented in a similar way.

To tag language-country preferences for Bing, place <meta http-equiv="content-language" content="language-country"> (language meta tags) in the head section of every page - just as with hreflang. The two tags can coexist, and the "language-country" codes are the same for both types.

# ACTIVELY LINK INTERNATIONAL PAGES TOGETHER

Web pages can benefit hugely if they attract a volume of relevant non-paid links from trusted third party websites. Each acts as a tacit vote of confidence - like a citation in an academic paper. Links can pass equity (ranking power) to a site, and this distributes itself through internal links to boost overall authority.

**This equity (or more formerly, PageRank) does not pass through hreflang tags or language meta tags.**

This means that once language/language-territory pages have been built and tagged, they need to be actively linked up. A language drop-down menu list is often effective.

Listing these options alongside flag icons is often the best approach. Language/language-territory information seldom sits in the body of a page, and the flags are instantly recognisable visual cues. Written language names (in the target language) can accompany these for clarity - flags symbolise nations, not languages.

# AVOID GEO-REDIRECTION

It's possible to force geo-targeted pages to searchers by instantly redirecting them based on their search location. This can be determined by IP address.

Forced redirects are seldom a good option. Not only could they frustrate users by serving different-than-requested content, but they can also be detrimental to crawling. As of December 2018 Google crawls websites mostly from the US, so automatically redirecting based on location may make it harder for international pages to get traction.

Google specifically states that it's crawler Googlebot shouldn't be treated any differently than users else there's [risk of penalisation for cloaking](#). This has challenges for SEO and in particular, the homepage of a website which is often the most linked to page needs to be treated in [one of three ways](#).

Ultimately, proper [hreflang tagging](#) in combination with a country/language menu and [search console targeting](#) is likely to be more effective in international SEO efforts. Plus, it's more likely to provide a good user experience. Automatically redirecting based on location is a risky tactic for the sake of saving a click. Some sites prefer to use IP address to **offer** searchers a specific language/language-territory version, but this has no SEO benefit.



# REINFORCE INTERNATIONAL TARGETING IN GOOGLE SEARCH CONSOLE

Once a [subfolder/subdirectory structure is set up](#) and [pages are correctly tagged](#), further reinforce page targeting in Google Search Console. This simple step is a direct line to Google, but it's a sign of intent rather than a command. It doesn't matter if site owners haven't set up Google Search Console - a new property needs to be set up for each international subfolder/subdirectory anyway. This is important to avoid accidentally geotargeting a whole generic domain to a specific territory. A mistake like this is easy to make and could result in a swift decline in traffic.

To geotarget a site in Google Search Console (as of December 2018) visit the platform, select the property you want to target, and follow:

- > Go to the old version
  - > Search traffic
    - > International targeting
      - > Languages or country

Bing Webmaster Tools is roughly equivalent to Google Search Console for the Bing browser, and it allows geotargeting in the same way. Search [Geotargeting your website - Bing](#) for more.



# SUMMARY

To optimise a site for international audiences:

- ✓ Structure a site for international audiences using subfolders (also known as subdirectories).
- ✓ Tag canonical, international versions of pages with hreflang and make sure these reference each other. Tag for language only, language-territory, or combinations of these based on the realities of your business.
- ✓ Actively link international pages together for ease of crawling.
- ✓ Avoid automatic geo-redirection. This could damage international SEO efforts, and there are better alternatives for user experience.
- ✓ Reinforce international targeting in Google Search Console.

Blue Array can help with all areas of international SEO featured in this piece. Contact us for support, or just to feed back on the information you've read.

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*"Blue Array is a rare gem in an industry that is often clouded by mis-information and uncertainty. Put simply, I really could not recommend them highly enough! Thank you!"*



Andrew Jervis, Co-Founder