

# Business

## Found in translation: More customers in India

BANGALORE, INDIA

Amazon adds a Hindi site as it looks for an entry into a huge new market

BY VINDU GOEL

Only 10 percent of India's 1.3 billion people know English. Yet most of the country's e-commerce services have been offered only in English, closing off online shopping to the vast majority of people here.

Now Amazon is aiming to break through that language barrier. The e-commerce giant is offering a hearty "na-

maste" to this country's half-billion Hindi speakers by making its local website and apps available in India's most popular language. Users of the India site or app will be able to choose Hindi as their preferred language, much as users in the United States can choose Spanish.

Amazon's expansion into Hindi — the American online retailer's first foray into an Indian language, even as other companies have tried that strategy and pulled back — is vital to the company's ambition of making India its next big market.

The same day it announced the Hindi option, Amazon's market value reached \$1 trillion, after Apple achieved that benchmark last month. Amazon shares rose as high as \$2,050.50 on Tuesday morning in United States trading, push-

ing it over \$1 trillion in value, before immediately falling back and then ending the day at \$2,039.51, below the \$1 trillion threshold.

Amazon is already the No. 2 player in India's \$33 billion e-commerce market and says it has about 150 million registered users here. But as it seeks to reach the country's farthest regions and appeal to less-educated customers in the world's fastest-growing pool of internet users, it has found that English is not enough.

"The next 100 million customers will have to be in the vernacular language," said Kishore Thota, director of customer experience and marketing for Amazon India.

Mr. Thota said the company's research found that eight in 10 Indian

customers would prefer to shop in a language other than English. "The level of trust increases when they see something in their own language," he said in an interview at Amazon's India headquarters in Bangalore.

Prominently serving Hindi-speaking customers could also help Amazon deflect the political pressure coming from New Delhi, where policymakers are considering ways to curb the power of foreign internet companies.

If the Hindi versions of its site and apps are successful, Amazon plans to quickly add options to shop in other major Indian languages, such as Bengali, Tamil, Kannada and Telugu, which are dominant in regions outside the Hindi belt in the north.

Amazon's Hindi site is the most ambi-

tious attempt so far to serve Indian shoppers who do not speak English. Another e-commerce site, Snapdeal, tried local-language versions about three years ago, then abandoned them because few customers used them.

Amazon is betting that the market is more ready now, especially as cheap mobile data means that Indian-language speakers are coming online at a brisk clip.

Paytm, a digital payments company that operates the No. 3 online retailer, Paytm Mall, began allowing customers to make purchases in 10 Indian languages in October. About 15 percent of the site's customers do that, said Amit Sinha, who heads the digital marketplace.

But most of Paytm's listings are still in

English. Converting them to other languages requires Paytm to build new automated translation tools as well as to persuade sellers and brands to translate their own content. "It's a multidimensional problem," Mr. Sinha said.

For Amazon, creating a Hindi-language site and app was difficult from the start. When the company began building its Hindi app and site about two years ago, it first tried to run the English version through a translation algorithm. The result "was completely illegible," Mr. Thota said.

So the team went back to the drawing board, tapping people to translate key listings and steps in the purchase process into colloquial Hindi. They then showed samples to actual and potential

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PRIYADARSHINI RAVICHANDRAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A group meeting at Amazon's India headquarters in Bangalore.

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customers, refined them and used the final versions to train the algorithms to do mass translation.

Not everything has been translated yet, and Amazon is working with leading brands to convert their pages. People are also reviewing pages to make sure they look right, since there is often more than one way to translate an English phrase into Hindi.

One challenge is that spoken Hindi mixes in a lot of English. Amazon decided that some words and phrases, like "free," "jeans" and "cash on delivery," should be kept in English but written using Hindi's Devanagari script.

Language is just one barrier to increasing the number of online shoppers in India, which is adding 40 million internet users a year, according to a recent study by Bain, Google and the Omidyar Network, an investment firm.

Most of the 390 million Indians with internet access use it to chat with friends and family, watch videos, listen to music, look for religious content and read the news, the study found.

Just 40 percent transact online, and about one-third of those stop after one purchase.

Roopa Kudva, who heads Omidyar's operations in India, said that buying something online is the last step in the journey of a new internet user.

"Indians are very comfortable experimenting on the internet," she said. "But the moment it comes to making payments online, people think it's a very sophisticated thing that requires expert knowledge, and they shy away from it."

While being able to shop in a familiar language is important, she said, many of the global conventions of online shopping, such as the shopping cart, are unfamiliar to Indians, who are more used to going to a store and asking a shopkeeper to pull items from a shelf.

Amazon said it realized that the Hindi

version of its site would not suddenly solve those problems.

"It will make people feel a lot more comfortable that we understand them," said Amit Agarwal, the head of Amazon India. "But we are focused on all the barriers that will ultimately transform how India buys and sells."

For example, Amazon offers customer support in half a dozen Indian languages, and today, more than half the queries are in languages other than English.

The company has also signed up about 14,000 retail locations across India for its Amazon Easy program, in which a local shopkeeper helps customers place Amazon orders, receives packages and then delivers them. "They provide basic customer service in a language the customer understands," Mr. Thota said.

It is not clear how quickly other companies might follow. Flipkart, India's largest online retailer, has not begun offering its services in local languages. Walmart recently bought a majority stake in the company for \$16 billion, and it is unclear what plans the American retailer has in that area.

Google is also considering a move into e-commerce in India. It recently invested in the Chinese online retailer JD.com, and last week announced plans to turn its multilingual Indian payments app, Google Pay, into more of a portal through which offline and online merchants could handle transactions.

By 2021, 73 percent of India's internet users will prefer to use languages other than English, compared with 57 percent in 2016, according to a study last year by KPMG and Google.

Given those trends, every e-commerce site in India has to figure out a way to address the local-language problem.

"Anybody who is serious about this country will have to do it," Mr. Sinha of Paytm said.