Bilingual website design: what makes a site genuinely easy to use for Arabic and English speakers

Why a bilingual website is more than two sets of pages

A bilingual website serves two languages, in Oman that means Arabic and English, but making it easy to use takes more than translating every sentence. Many visitors switch between languages depending on their comfort or the device they are using. A site that handles both well respects the reading habits, layout expectations and cultural norms of each audience. When done right, the experience feels seamless: the reader does not have to stop and think about navigation, text direction or missing content.

Bilingual website design starts with the decision of how to structure the two languages. The most common method uses language pages: separate sets of URLs for each version, such as site.com/en/ for English pages and site.com/ar/ for Arabic ones. This approach keeps content organised and helps search engines index each language correctly. Another method places both languages on the same page with toggles, but that can confuse readers and make maintenance harder. For most businesses in Oman, separate language pages provide the clearest experience.

Language switcher placement and behaviour

The language switcher is the main tool a visitor uses to move between Arabic and English. It should be visible from every page, ideally in the top navigation bar or a fixed position. A common mistake is hiding the switcher in a hamburger menu or at the bottom of the page. A visitor who lands on the wrong language version by default should be able to switch with one tap, without losing their place or needing to re-enter search terms.

Good switchers remember the user’s choice across sessions. If a visitor selects Arabic, the site should keep showing Arabic pages until they change again. Some sites also detect the browser language and redirect automatically, but this can be jarring if the guess is wrong. Offering a clear prompt, “This page is available in English”, works better than forcing a redirect. The reader stays in control.

Text direction and layout

Arabic reads from right to left, while English reads left to right. A bilingual site must handle both directions without breaking the layout. That means the navigation bar, the logo, the search box and the sidebars all need to mirror when the language switches. A left-aligned logo on the

English page should appear on the right on the Arabic page. Buttons, icons and even the order of form fields should reverse as well.



CSS direction properties (dir="rtl" and dir="ltr") handle most of the text flow, but the real challenge lies in how images, charts and embedded elements behave. An image that makes sense in English, such as a timeline flowing left to right, may confuse Arabic readers if it stays the same. Content localisation goes beyond translation: it considers whether graphics, symbols and colours carry the same meaning in both cultures. For example, a green tick might mean “correct” in English contexts but carry a different connotation in Arabic. Testing each element in both languages catches these mismatches.

Arabic typography and font rendering

Arabic typography differs from Latin scripts in several ways. Arabic letters connect to each other, their shape changes depending on position (initial, medial, final, isolated), and the script uses diacritics for short vowels and pronunciation marks. A font that looks clean in English might appear cramped or broken in Arabic, especially on small screens. Good bilingual website design chooses a typeface that supports both scripts with consistent weight and spacing, and that renders Arabic glyphs correctly across browsers and operating systems.

Font size also matters. Arabic text often needs a slightly larger font size than English to maintain readability, because the script has many vertical strokes and dots. Testing the Arabic version on actual mobile devices reveals whether the text is comfortable to read. Some fonts include built-in ligatures for common letter combinations; these improve the visual flow but must be supported by the browser. A fallback font stack that includes common Arabic system fonts (such as Noto Naskh Arabic or Traditional Arabic) ensures the text remains legible even if the primary font fails to load.

Translated navigation and interface labels

Navigation menus, buttons, error messages and form labels all need translation, not just the main content. A visitor should never see an English button label in the middle of an Arabic page, or a mix of languages in the same menu. Translated navigation means every link, dropdown item and breadcrumb reads naturally in the selected language. Shortcuts like “Home” or “Contact” may have no direct one-word Arabic equivalent; a good translator or localisation specialist finds terms that fit the available space without breaking the layout.

Form validation messages also require attention. An Arabic error message such as “يرجى إدخال بريد إلكتروني صالح” (please enter a valid email) must appear in the same position and style as its English counterpart. If the English version uses a red border, the Arabic version should too. Consistency builds trust. A site that looks polished in one language but broken in the other loses credibility fast.

Mobile layout considerations

Most web traffic in Oman comes from mobile devices. A bilingual website must work well on small screens in both languages. Arabic text, being more compact horizontally, can fit into narrower columns than English, but the vertical space needed may be similar or greater because of diacritics. Buttons and touch targets should be large enough to tap comfortably in either language. The language switcher must remain accessible on mobile, not buried in a menu that requires multiple taps.



Testing on actual phones and tablets with both language versions active reveals layout issues early. Common problems include text overflowing its container, images not resizing correctly, and dropdown menus that overlap or disappear. Fixing these for one language often breaks the other. A design that uses flexible containers and avoids fixed widths handles both scripts more gracefully.

Content localisation beyond translation

Literal translation rarely produces a natural result. Content localisation adapts the message to the cultural context of the target audience. For a business in Oman, that means using local expressions, date formats (Gregorian and Hijri), currency symbols (OMR with the correct placement), and addressing conventions that feel familiar to Arabic readers. An English page might say “Call us now”; the Arabic equivalent might prefer “اتصل بنا الآن” (contact us now) but also include a culturally appropriate greeting.

Images and icons also need localisation. A hand gesture, a colour or a symbol that works in English might offend or confuse Arabic readers. For example, showing a person pointing with the left hand can be seen as impolite in some Arab cultures. Reviewing every visual element for cultural fit is part of thorough bilingual website design. A company like Oman Website Design that builds sites for the Omani market typically considers these nuances during the design phase, ensuring both language versions feel native.

Consistency across language pages

Visitors expect the same level of detail and functionality in both languages. If the English version has a live chat widget, the Arabic version should too. If the English contact form collects a phone number, the Arabic form should offer the same fields, possibly with adjusted labels. Inconsistencies frustrate users and make the site feel unfinished. A content management system that stores both language versions in the same structure helps maintain parity.

Regular audits catch drift. Over time, content updates may be applied to only one language version, leaving the other outdated. A bilingual site needs a process that keeps both versions synchronised, either through a translation workflow or by assigning the same editor to both languages. Tools like translation memory systems reduce duplication and ensure recurring phrases (such as “Privacy Policy”) stay consistent.

Testing with real users

The only reliable way to know if a bilingual website is easy to use is to test it with people who speak each language natively. Watching an Arabic speaker navigate the Arabic version reveals where the layout breaks, where labels are unclear, and where the flow feels unnatural. The same test with an English speaker on the English version provides a baseline comparison. Differences in task completion time, error rate or satisfaction score highlight areas for improvement.



Testing should cover common scenarios: finding a product, filling in a contact form, switching languages mid-session, and reading a long article. Each scenario exposes different friction points. For instance, a user might find the language switcher easily on the homepage but struggle to locate it on a product page. Fixing these issues before launch saves later frustration.

Bilingual website design is not a one-time task. Languages evolve, content changes and user expectations shift. A site that genuinely serves both Arabic and English speakers requires ongoing attention to typography, layout, navigation and cultural nuance. When those details come together, the reader barely notices the work behind the scenes, they simply find what they need, in the language they prefer, without friction. That is the mark of a genuinely easy-to-use bilingual site.