Bilingual website design: reaching UAE customers in their language

The United Arab Emirates is a country where two languages meet in daily life. Arabic is the official language, but English is widely used in business, retail and tourism. For a company operating in the UAE, a monolingual website leaves a large part of the potential audience out. The solution is a site that serves both languages equally well, and that means more than just running a translation tool over the existing text.

What bilingual website design means in practice

A bilingual website is not simply an English site with an Arabic version tacked on. The design has to accommodate two different writing systems, two reading directions, and two sets of cultural expectations around layout and imagery. The English version reads left to right, while the Arabic version reads right to left. That shift affects everything from the position of the logo to the placement of buttons and navigation labels.

When a user switches the language, the entire layout should mirror. The menu that sat on the left in English should move to the right in Arabic. The call-to-action button that was on the right should appear on the left. This is not a cosmetic choice; it is about usability. A visitor who sees a familiar layout structure will navigate the site with ease. One who sees a layout that still feels English, even though the text is Arabic, will hesitate.

How a language switcher works

The language switcher is the control that lets a visitor choose between Arabic and English. It is usually placed in the header or the top navigation bar, and it should be visible from any page. A common pattern is a dropdown or a toggle that shows the language codes (AR / EN) or the full language names. The switcher must remember the user's choice as they move through the site. If someone selects Arabic on the homepage and then clicks to the services page, that page should load in Arabic automatically.

There are two main approaches to building a language switcher. One uses separate URLs for each language version, such as example.com/en/ and example.com/ar/. The other keeps the same URL and switches the content based on a cookie or a session variable. Both have their trade-offs. Separate URLs are better for search engine optimisation because each language version can be indexed independently. The cookie-based approach is simpler to implement but can cause issues with search engines if not handled carefully.



Arabic typography and layout challenges

Arabic script is cursive, with letters that change shape depending on their position in a word. This creates challenges for web design that English does not. Fonts that work well for English may not support Arabic characters at all, or may render them poorly. Choosing a font family that covers both scripts and maintains visual consistency is essential.

Text expansion is another factor to plan for. Arabic text is often more compact than English, but it can also be longer in certain contexts. A button label that fits neatly in English may be too short or too long in Arabic. The design must allow for text expansion without breaking the layout. That means flexible containers, not fixed widths, and testing every interface element in both languages before launch.

Right-to-left layout affects more than just text alignment. Icons, arrows and other visual cues that imply direction must be mirrored. An arrow pointing right in English might mean "next" or "forward", but in Arabic it should point left to convey the same meaning. Images that show a sequence, such as a step-by-step illustration, may need to be flipped. The goal is to create a reading experience that feels native to each language, not a translation of the original design.

Content translation versus localisation

A common mistake is to rely on machine translation for the Arabic version of a site. Machine translation has improved, but it still produces awkward phrasing and can miss cultural nuances. A professional human translator who understands the local audience will produce text that reads naturally. This is especially important for marketing copy, where tone and persuasion matter as much as accuracy.

Localisation goes beyond translation. It adapts the content to the cultural context of the target audience. Colours, images and references that work in an English-language site may not resonate with Arabic-speaking users. For example, imagery that shows people in casual Western clothing might feel out of place in a site aimed at a conservative Emirati audience. The imagery should reflect the diversity of the UAE's population, showing both traditional and modern elements.

Building websites for Arabic and English audiences means thinking about the entire user journey in both languages. A visitor should be able to complete any task, whether it is reading a blog post, filling out a contact form, or making a purchase, without switching back to English to finish the process. That requires testing every flow in both languages and fixing any issues that arise.

Responsive layout for both scripts

Responsive design is standard practice for modern websites, but bilingual sites add an extra layer of complexity. A layout that works on a mobile screen in English may break when the same content is displayed in Arabic. The text direction change can cause elements to overlap or misalign. Testing on actual devices, not just browser resizing tools, is the only way to catch these problems.

Navigation labels must be concise in both languages. A long English menu item may become even longer in Arabic, or vice versa. The designer should choose labels that are short enough to fit on a single line in both scripts. If that is not possible, the navigation should wrap gracefully without cutting off text or creating a confusing visual.



Why this matters for UAE businesses

The UAE has a diverse population. Expatriates make up a large percentage of residents, and English is the common language among many nationalities. But Arabic remains the language of government, education and daily life for a significant portion of the population. A business that wants to reach both groups cannot afford to favour one language over the other.

Search behaviour also differs by language. Users who search in Arabic use different keywords and phrases than those who search in English. A bilingual site that is properly optimised for both languages will appear in search results for both sets of queries. That means more visibility and more potential customers.

Trust is another factor. A visitor who lands on a site and sees content in their own language is more likely to engage with it. They feel that the business understands them and values their custom. A site that forces them to read in a second language, or that offers a poorly translated version, creates the opposite impression.

Building websites for Arabic and English audiences is not a one-time project. It requires ongoing maintenance. New content must be added in both languages, and updates to the

design must be tested in both directions. The investment pays off in the form of a broader reach and a stronger connection with the local market.

Practical considerations for getting started

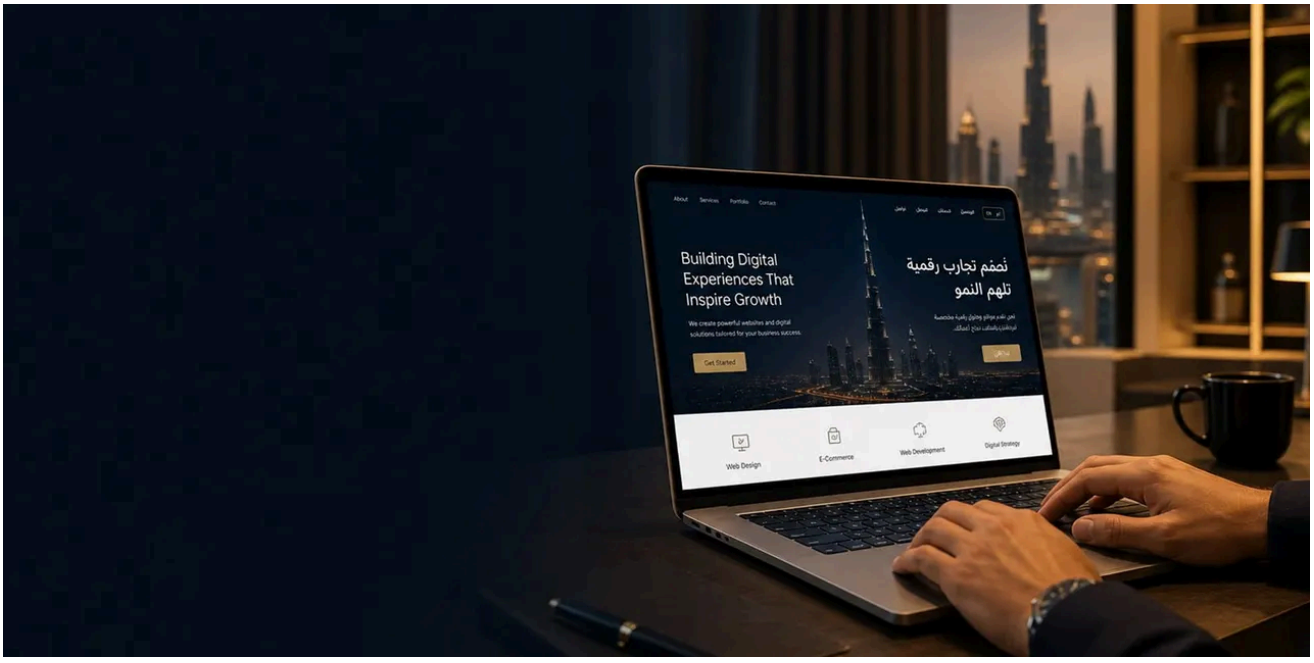
A business that is planning a bilingual website should start by defining the scope. Will all pages be available in both languages, or only the most important ones? A common approach is to launch with the core pages, such as the homepage, about page, services page and contact page, in both languages, and add the rest over time. This keeps the initial project manageable and allows for testing before a full rollout.

The choice of content management system matters. Some platforms have built-in multilingual support, while others require plugins or custom development. The CMS should allow separate editing of each language version, so that a change to the English text does not automatically overwrite the Arabic version. It should also handle right-to-left styling without custom code.

Testing is the step that many teams rush. A bilingual site should be tested by native speakers of both languages, not just by the development team. They will catch phrasing issues, layout problems and cultural mismatches that a non-native speaker would miss. The testing should cover all devices and browsers that the target audience uses.

Common pitfalls to avoid

One pitfall is treating the Arabic version as a second-class citizen. If the English site gets regular updates and the Arabic site is left to grow stale, the business sends a clear message about which audience it prioritises. Both versions should be maintained with the same care.



Another is ignoring the visual hierarchy in the Arabic layout. English readers scan a page from left to right, top to bottom. Arabic readers scan from right to left. The most important information should be placed where the eye naturally lands first in each language. That may mean rearranging content blocks between the two versions, not just mirroring the layout.

Finally, avoid using flag icons for the language switcher. The UAE has a diverse population, and many Arabic speakers are not from the UAE. A flag icon can be confusing or even offensive. Use text labels instead, such as "English" and "العربية", to make the choice clear.

A bilingual website is a practical investment for any business that wants to serve the full range of customers in the UAE. It requires careful planning, thoughtful design and ongoing attention. But the result is a site that welcomes everyone, no matter which language they speak.