

# A Guide to Using Translation Services



BY PATRICIA MAY

A large, hand-painted sign pokes out of the cornfield along the highway, shouting in red letters, "Outsourcing—the end to American jobs!" The painter probably means "off-shoring," but the prospect is frightening, regardless. Our economy, an inhuman force comprising numerous factors and countless actors, is changing drastically, and it will not do an about-face just because we wish it to.

Our only choice is to acquire the knowledge and learn the skills we need to participate in the new global economy. This is the first in a series of articles that will talk about some of the basic issues facing any business that wants to weather this transition successfully.

In a climate of escalating international commerce, one crucial issue is document translation. When should a company spring for professional translation services? When is your niece's two years of high school French good enough?

## WHY TRANSLATE YOUR MATERIALS?

People occasionally claim that everyone in the world speaks English, and to some extent that's true. English is the language of business, and many countries give their students at least several years of English training. But, many people do not speak English, and expecting them to accommodate us can be viewed as rude. In addition, local law may require shipping labels,

instruction manuals, guarantees, and contractual agreements to be written in the local language.

Due to today's wave of immigration—the largest since the turn of the last century—doing business within our borders requires multilingual attention, as well. Today, the majority of employers in the United States have at least some workers with limited English proficiency. Training workers in a language they don't speak, particularly in hazardous areas, or giving out benefits information they may not understand can create uncomfortable exposure for the company in case of an accident or an insurance claim.

But, can the needed translation be done without breaking the budget? Knowing when a professional is required and what other options are available can save your company money and frustration.

## WHAT TYPE OF TRANSLATION SERVICE DO YOU NEED?

The translation of foreign-language faxes, short e-mails, picture captions, and document comments can sometimes be handled by an automatic online translation service or by the multi-language translation programs sold by software retailers. These should be used for your information only; they should never be used for publication.

When using an automatic translator, if possible, enter entire phrases, rather than individual words, as context is extremely important to meaning. Try several different options. Be aware that verbs, pronouns and adjectives may change form in such a

way as to become unrecognizable from the dictionary entries many of the software programs use. Word order also varies widely between languages, so a word-by-word translation may take some imagination to understand.

When you only need the overall gist of a document for internal use, this might be good enough. This is also the type of situation in which that niece with some high school French would come in handy. Don't ask for a translation; tell her an approximation will do. Anyone who has studied a language already knows that reading and understanding another language is very different from translating it into English.

A word of caution about some software programs: A young friend wanted to write to his grandmother, who still lived in Germany. Not having studied German, he bought a box of software and ran his English letter through it. His mother, who spoke German, read the resulting translation, but could not understand it. When she ran that German back through the software, neither of them could understand the English result!

Obviously, there are times when it is important to know exactly what the foreign-language document actually says. But, should you pay to have the entire thing translated? Maybe not.

Any translation agency will provide what is called *gisting*. One of the professional translators writes a summary of the document. You can request to have just the headers or the table of contents or the

abstract translated. You will be charged per hour, and you can use the result to decide whether you need the full document translated, or just certain sections.

Gisting, incidentally, is a good way to find out if you need the document translated at all. Information coming from government agencies often is sent to a broad audience and may not be relevant to your situation.

There are times when a full professional translation is absolutely necessary. No one should ever sign a contract or invest money on the basis of documents that were originally drafted in a foreign language without a certified translation of those documents. In such cases, both the original (or *source*) document and the translated (or *target*) document should contain a phrase specifying which language is binding in cases of dispute.

So far, we've talked about translation of foreign documents into English. Consider now the reverse: For instance, marketing materials for foreign customers and information for immigrant employees.

A bad translation can be funny to the reader and catastrophic to a company. Any English speaker who has traveled abroad has seen outrageous signs in English. In Peru, a waiter graciously gave us an English menu that was largely incomprehensible. Should people in Mexico or Germany or China read assembly instructions and laugh at them? Should employees read and re-read a training manual, trying to understand what it is supposed to teach them? These are times that call for professional translation.

Medical information, instructions on operating equipment, and patent research are other examples of instances in which a professional translation is needed. The rule of thumb: Whenever a misunderstanding of a text could have serious results, get help from a professional.

#### WHAT YOU GET FOR YOUR MONEY

If a translation is necessary, how much will it cost, and how will you be able to determine whether you are getting value for your money?

Like the cost of any other service, the price of language translation varies dramatically. The expansion of the Internet has made it possible for anyone, anywhere, to

put up a Web site claiming they are trained, talented and experienced at the craft. Here are some things to consider when seeking translation services:

- A good translator is well-educated. Most top-notch linguists have advanced degrees, in addition to specific translation credentials.
- A good translator is fluent in both languages, but translates only into his or her native language. No matter how extensive the training or how long one has lived in the language area, there are always cultural references and special expressions that come only from growing up in the language.
- A good translator is an excellent writer. Often, the target material, while written at the same reading level as the source material and presenting the same information, sounds better than the original.
- A good translator always works as part of a team. Just as any writer needs an editor, a translator needs someone to look at, revise, rewrite, and proofread the work.

Anyone needing a translation has the choice of hiring an independent translator or using a translation agency. If you choose to hire an individual, remember that credentials are good, experience is better, and best of all is a recommendation from another professional working in the field.

Make sure to ask whether the price includes editing, and specify that you want a second professional linguist fluent in both languages to do the editing. An editor will lay both languages side by side and check that the meaning is transferred accurately from one to the other. He/she will also check grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage.

Many independent translators charge a lower rate to an agency and a higher rate to a direct client. Make several calls so you are sure of what you are getting, but don't expect a professional team to work for minimum wage.

If you choose to hire a translation agency, it should provide additional services. The company will have teams tested, trained and ready to work when you call. Most agencies have specific teams for legal work and others for technical work. Office staff will prepare the documents for the

translation teams, clarifying any ambiguities and securing definitions for unusual terms or usage.

A translation agency should provide an additional proofreading and completion check, and the document should be returned well formatted. In addition, the agency will maintain translation memories of your specialized vocabulary and template-type information (guarantees, directions, etc.), along with archives ready for the next time. It will have additional staff to call on if a member of the original team is unavailable. For rush requests, an agency will have teams in various places and will be able to move the translation across time zones to meet a deadline.

Once you have chosen an agency, you can return to them for many different languages and many different types of documents without repeating the original search for a translation team.

A word of caution: Don't expect the agency to give you the names of the team members. The agency has spent years developing these teams, and the members work under strict non-compete contracts, as well as a confidentiality agreement, which is an industry standard.

#### IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK

There are questions to ask when you hire a translation agency, just as when you hire an independent translator:

- How long has the company been in business, and who are some of its current clients? Request a reference.
- What qualifications do the translation teams have? Be aware that most agencies will provide a short sample translation without charge. But, you will need to specifically request the same team do your actual job as did the sample.
- Have they handled texts in your industry?
- Can the agency provide translation for different geographic areas? For example, Chinese translation going to Taiwan should be done in Traditional Chinese. If it's going to the People's Republic of China, it should be done in Simplified Chinese. Both types of Chinese may need to be targeted for Mandarin speakers.
- Will the translation be proofread and edited? Verify that a second professional linguist fluent in both languages will do

the editing.

- How do they handle industry- or company-specific terminology? Be prepared to name a contact person at your firm who can answer questions and provide reference materials.
- How will the files be returned? Can the agency handle various desktop publishing programs? (Expect an extra charge for replacing the English with the foreign language and adjusting the layout to fit. Because many texts expand significantly as they are translated from English, this typesetting can be time-consuming.)
- Can they provide the necessary fonts or show you where to purchase them?
- How does the translation company handle archives and future revisions? You may need another translation someday.
- Will the agency comment if pictures or cultural references are inappropriate for the target readers?

One caution about marketing materials:

Marketing is very culturally specific. Whereas instructions for assembly or use, labels, warranty information, internal training materials, and benefits information can simply be translated, marketing materials may need to be rewritten by a marketer familiar with the target audience.

#### **OTHER IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW**

Whether you choose an independent translator or an agency, give them time to work. Recall how long it took to write the original document, and consider that it now has to be rewritten, but in another language.

Like any other service provider, a translation agency will do better for your company the longer they work for you. The same team will always be assigned to the work coming from your company. They will learn vocabulary preferences, and they may even ask to visit your business to see how specific equipment functions. Help them do a good job by providing pictures

of equipment and letting them know anything special about your industry.

People working in the translation industry are globally minded, and they thrive on helping individuals and companies bridge the gap into another culture. Their services are essential to any company wishing to participate in the global economy. The smaller our world becomes, the more important it is that we understand each other.

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