



Ask Not What the Crowd Can Do for You, but What You Can Do for the Crowd

Two months ago we looked at crowdsourcing and how it relates to our profession. At about the same time the June issue was published, LinkedIn, a professional online network, reached out to its membership to see if its users who identified themselves as translators would be interested in localizing the LinkedIn website for free through a crowdsourcing model, similar to the one employed by Facebook. However, there is one critical distinction between Facebook and LinkedIn. Facebook is a social site, and while the often tortured translations produced by amateur volunteers look silly, the site makes no pretense of providing professional services. LinkedIn, on the other hand, is predicated on fostering professionalism.

Judging by the flurry of comments on Twitter and, paradoxically, on LinkedIn groups, to say that professional translators were not happy with LinkedIn's outreach would be an understatement. To amplify the outcry of our members, an open letter from ATA's president to LinkedIn's chief executive officer was published and ATA's Public Relations Committee drafted a press release for the media explaining why the LinkedIn effort is misguided (see www.atanet.org/pressroom/linkedin_2009.pdf and page 9 in this issue).

Thinking about crowdsourcing in general and looking at the 10 rules of crowdsourcing identified by Jeff Howe, the crowdsourcing guru, some questions come to mind:

1. **Pick the right model.** Are you trying to create a platform for volunteers to contribute to a worthy cause or are you looking for cheap labor?
2. **Pick the right crowd.** Do you think that being bilingual qualifies a person to translate, or do you believe that professional translation requires professional

As an association, we have a voice.

translators? How would you feel about surgery done by an amateur surgeon?

3. **Offer the right incentives.** Is it right for a venture capital funded company to offer a token payment for professional services? Is there a difference between that and the same token payment offered by a charitable nonprofit organization?

4. **Keep the pink slips in the drawer.** Can you attract volunteer professionals who will deliver at the same consistently good level you are accustomed to from your paid staff or freelance translators?

5. **The benevolent dictator principle.** Can a volunteer community function without a community leader?

6. **Keep it simple and break it down.** Can you divide the work into the smallest possible components so that the crowd can divvy up the tasks? Will it work to have a collection of individual sentences translated by different people?

7. **Remember Sturgeon's Law.** According to the science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon, 90% of everything is crap. Can you achieve the desired quality?

8. **Remember the 10%, the antidote to Sturgeon's Law.** Can you identify the best and brightest in the crowd to work on your project?

9. **The community is always right.** Who is in control? Is it possible to guide and control an online community?

10. **Ask not what the crowd can do for you, but what you can do for the crowd.** Does the project meet the needs of the crowd or rather the needs of the requestor of services? Will the crowd participate if its needs are not met?

Does all this mean that translation and crowdsourcing are incompatible? No. Crowdsourcing works if certain conditions are met. The most important of these is that the initiator of the crowdsourcing effort gives the crowd something that it wants. In the June issue we mentioned the successful crowdsourcing effort by Kiva Microfunds—this organization gives the crowd the opportunity to participate in a worthwhile effort to lift entrepreneurs in third world countries from poverty. People are drawn to participate if their specific needs are being met, be they emotional or economical. LinkedIn would surely attract a crowd of professional translators in exchange for fair compensation.

Like many others, LinkedIn—otherwise a fine organization with a thriving ATA group using it—failed to recognize the value that professional translators (and interpreters) provide. As an association, we have a voice. It is up to us to reach out, both to the public and within our own ranks, to make sure that the public appreciates our services and that we are providing good reason for these services to be appreciated.

ata