

Translation Services: Say What You Mean and Mean What You Say



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In today's global economy, technology companies are faced with cultural and linguistic challenges which can only rarely be handled using internal resources. In order to be able to communicate with non-English speakers – whether through material safety data sheets, operation manuals, or marketing materials – technology companies outsource the translation of documents to outside vendors.

Given the low entry barrier for establishing a translation business, the U.S. market is literally flooded with translation service providers. The question then arises: How do you select a translation service provider that will suit your needs? The short answer is that, generally, you get what you pay for. The long answer is the focus of this article.



Translator vs. Translation Company

The role of a translation company is not just to translate. In fact, most translation in today's market is done by independent contractors – the translators – who work for translation companies. In a recent survey conducted by the American Translators Association, work for translation companies accounts for approximately 60 percent of translators' revenues. The value added to the translation process by the translation company is the ability to select translators and editors with appropriate linguistic and subject matter expertise, and the ability to manage multilingual projects.

Cost of Translation

Consider the cost, not just the price. You can pay a low price and incur high costs because the translation you receive is of substandard quality and either has to go through additional revisions which are expensive, or, even worse, if used as-is, can cause incalculable damage to the name and credibility of your company.

Conversely, you can lower your overall costs by using a translation service provider who consistently delivers high-quality services. In the U.S., the rates for translation are typically given on a per-word basis. The word count can be

determined easily by using the word-count feature in MS Word, and there are numerous other applications that can perform this task.

However, several questions arise: What constitutes a word? Should I pay for a list of brand names that does not require translation at all? How about xml tags? And tables with numbers only? To be sure, MS Word will count each word indiscriminately. It is up to you and the translation company to determine which portions of text are not to be translated. If you receive a quote from a



translation company based on word count, make sure that you are charged for the text that actually needs translation.

According to a survey conducted by the Common Sense Advisory, Inc., rates charged by translation service providers typically range from 17 to 29 cents per word. These rates are all-inclusive (not only the translation but also the project management time, editing and quality-assurance procedures) and cannot be compared to the rates charged by individual translators. The rates at the lower end of this range typically apply to Spanish and Portuguese. The higher end rates apply to Asian languages and right-to-left languages (such as Arabic and Hebrew).

When negotiating per-word rates, it is advisable to agree in advance on the basis of the calculation of the number of words. Word count of the same text in two different languages can differ by as much as 40 percent – this is true especially for Asian languages. It is a good practice to use the English version as the basis, regardless of whether it is the source or the target language. If the source text is in English, the word count is clear to all involved parties from the beginning and unpleasant surprises can be avoided when the time comes for invoicing.

Language

Is the Spanish version of your document going to be distributed in Spain? South America? Mexico? Or the U.S.? If it is distributed in the U.S., is it for Florida, where most Hispanics are from Cuba? Or is it for California, where most Hispanics are from Mexico? Choosing an appropriate regional variation is important not only because you want to address your audience in the language they are comfortable with, but also because some dialects can easily become politically charged (consider mainland China versus Taiwan, or Croatia versus Serbia).

A word is to be said about the source language, too. If your source language is English, think international from the beginning and use “translatable” text that can be adapted for the target audience. Avoid culture bound clichés which won’t be understood in other countries – baseball metaphors, for example, will fall flat just about anywhere outside of the U.S. Do not provide your international audience with toll-free numbers that will not work in their country. Be careful with symbols and visuals, puns and slogans. “Nothing sucks like an Electrolux” is not a good translation of a promotional piece for the Swedish manufacturer of vacuum cleaners.

Final Review

Resist the temptation to revise the translated text without talking to your translation service provider. In many languages, grammatical and spelling

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rules differ dramatically from English – if you see different endings attached to a proper name, it is not because the translator does not know how to spell the name, but rather because the language in question is inflected and requires different endings for different grammatical cases. Different languages have different capitalization rules, punctuation rules, formatting requirements, etc.

It is an established practice to receive feedback from the end user in the target country. Share this feedback with your translation service provider, preferably before the translated text is finalized. Have the translation service provider review the final product before it goes to print or before it is posted online – funny things can happen to files and fonts when they change hands. Another good practice is to have the translation reviewed by an independent third party, especially if you are working with a new translation service provider. Such a review can be done by another translation service provider.

Long-term Partnership

Taking time to select a translation service provider that meets your company’s needs will not only save you time and money, but will also lead to the development of a long-term, profitable partnership. The value of such a relationship cannot be overemphasized as the translation service provider will get to know your product or service intimately and will be able to cultivate a specially trained linguistic team. At the same time, your company will be able to use the linguistic feedback to streamline your own operations and communications.

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