

Success in any language

In today's global economy, marketing research 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 – be it a panel outside of the U.S. or Hispanics or other minorities in the U.S. – marketing research companies outsource the translation of surveys and other 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 given below.¹

Translator versus translation company

Translation is certainly the key component to getting your message across to your audience, and this task is performed by qualified individuals – the translators. Some marketing research companies have translators on staff, particularly those who specialize in the U.S. Hispanic market. Such an arrangement makes sense and is the most cost-effective. But what if you want to add a new language or conduct a survey in many languages? Typically, marketing research companies in such situations outsource the translation. This is where it gets interesting. How do you select your vendor?

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.² The value added to the translation process by the transla-

tion company is the ability to select translators and editors with appropriate linguistic and subject matter expertise, and the ability to manage multilingual projects.

The project manager in a translation company coordinates the workflow and is the single point of contact for the client. He or she makes sure that all language versions are prepared in the same format and that all steps necessary to produce a quality translation are taken. By working with networks of translators skilled in different languages and disciplines, translation companies are able to meet a variety of needs, and

Tips for buying translation services



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translators are matched to the specifications of your project. The oversight and coordination provided by translation companies are critical for multilingual projects or for projects requiring additional services such as desktop publishing or work with html files. In addition to coordinating the workflow for large projects, translation companies often prepare and maintain glossaries in specialized fields.

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. When you ask a translation company how much they will charge for an eight-minute survey, their first response will be, "Do you know how many words that is?" 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 html tags? And tables with numbers or checkboxes only? Does your file include instructions for an interviewer or a programmer that do not require translation?

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.,³ rates charged by translation ser-

vice providers typically range from \$0.17 to \$0.29 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 (which is typically the case when translating marketing research materials, save for the translation of survey responses), the word count is clear to all involved parties from the beginning and unpleasant surprises can be avoided when the time comes for invoicing.

Purpose of translation

Be sure that you tell your translation service provider how the translation will be used. Is it a script for a telephone interview? Is it an online survey or a printed questionnaire? This is particularly important for Asian languages - they use different characters depending on whether a survey is written or spoken. The intended use of a survey is critical information for a translator. Identifying who will take the survey helps the translator establish the appropriate tone, style and register for the target language. An online survey could be less formal because it may be targeting a younger, computer-savvy audience. A CATI survey about medical equipment targeted to doctors may need to be more formal and technical.

Differentiate between a for-publication and for-information level of quality. If you are distributing an online survey in 15 languages, you will want to take extra care to ensure

that everything is in line with what you wanted and that an appropriate style and register is used, in addition to having text free of grammatical and spelling errors. If your customer service department receives an e-mail with a query in another language, the translation does not have to be of for-publication quality as long as it is accurate; the same goes for verbatims received from respondents. Of course, the latter can be produced more quickly and cheaply than the first.

Language

Professional translators typically work into their native language. In the case of languages of limited diffusion this might not be possible; for example, professional translators who can translate from Czech and who are native English speakers would be quite hard to find. In such cases it is crucial that the translated text is edited by a speaker of the target language. Make sure that your translator service provider uses native speakers of the target language whenever possible.

Another language-related consideration is the target audience itself. Is the Spanish version of the survey 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. You certainly don't want to address your Taiwanese panel in Mandarin Chinese, which is spoken in the mainland China. You don't want to address Serbians in Croatian and Croats in Serbian (the artificial construct of "Serbo-Croatian" being a thing of the past now). Make sure that your translation service provider knows your target audience and is familiar with the concept of regional variations and dialects.

A word is to be said about the source language, too. If your source language is English, think internation-

al 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. Every collector of translation blunders will tell you that the Coors slogan “turn it loose” was translated into Spanish as “suffer from diarrhea.” Finally, chances are that the source text is not error-free; a good translation service provider will work with you to correct errors and contradictions in the source text and will point out potential translation pitfalls.

Final review

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

Occasionally, clients ask translation

service providers for back-translation. Much discussion has been devoted to this topic, and the general consensus in the marketing research community is that re-translation of the text back to its original language to check translation accuracy is a waste of time and money. The most efficient way to assure that a translation is correct is to have the translated text edited by another translator who reads a completed translation against the source text to validate the accuracy of the final target text, and gives detailed feedback. To achieve for-publication quality, it is advisable to have the translation proofread by yet another reader, whose task is to find typographical errors and verify coherence and readability in the target language, without reference to the source text. Editing – and sometimes proofreading – are included in the per-word fee charged by a translation service provider. Back-translation, on the other hand, requires an entirely new team of translators and typically results in a text that can deviate significantly from the original, even though the translation itself may be quite accurate. This leaves the client bewildered while no true insight as to whether the translation is good or not has been achieved. Back-translation is typically used in the pharmaceutical industry and is followed by an extensive collaborative effort of all parties involved to eliminate even the slightest chance of mistranslation. In the marketing research industry, it is best to steer clear of back-translation, unless you want to see your translation costs triple or quadruple.

Dos and don'ts

- Finalize the source text before you begin the translation process, but don't wait until the last minute for translations.
- Do not ask your bilingual staff member to do the translation.
- Remember that there is an expansion factor in many languages and that the translated text may be longer than the source text.
- Inquire about the translation service provider's area of expertise.

- Ask for references.
- Find out if the translation service provider offers a single point of contact.
- Be involved. An inquisitive translation service provider is good news; provide the information they ask for.
- Indicate the purpose of the translation.
- Specify who the target audience is.
- Discuss the conversion of currencies and units with your translation service provider.
- Provide reference materials and glossaries whenever possible.
- Do not confuse “editing” with “back-translation.”
- Provide feedback to your translation service provider – positive or negative. An honest evaluation will improve your later projects.
- Remember that translation is a creative process. If it took you weeks to prepare the English version, you should not expect to have the translation back overnight.

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. |Q

¹A standard that will be useful as a guide to buying translation services will be available soon from the American Society for Testing and Materials, which is now in the final stages of producing a “Consumer-Oriented Guide to Quality Assurance in Translation and Localization.” Contact the authors of this article for more information.

²Jiri Stejskal and Dorothee Racette: “Survey of Corporate and Freelance Members Regarding Payment Practices.” *ATA Chronicle* 6 (2005), 11-17.

³Renato S. Beninatto and Donald A. DePalma: “Translation: Is the Price Ever Right?” June 2004. www.common senseadvisory.com. A summary is available at the listed site and from the authors of this article.