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Expert Insight

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Tips for Buying Translation Services

By Vistage member [Jiri Stejskal, PhD](#)

In today's global economy, companies are faced with cultural and linguistic challenges which can rarely be handled using internal resources. To communicate with speakers of other languages, companies often outsource the translation of documents and collateral to outside vendors. How do you select a translation service provider that best suits your needs? The short answer is you get what you pay for. The long answer is given below.

Translator versus translation company

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 of translation, not just the price. You can pay a low price yet incur high costs if the translation you receive is of substandard quality and either has to be re-translated or used as-is. Poor translation can cause incalculable damage to the your brand and credibility. A translation service provider that consistently delivers high-quality services can keep your costs low.

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. However, several questions arise: What constitutes a word? Should you pay for a list of brand names that does not require translation at all? How about xml tags? And tables with numbers only? MS Word will count each word indiscriminately. It's up to you and the translation company to determine which portions of text should not be translated. If you receive a quote from a translation company based on word count, make sure you're charged for 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 \$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 should not be compared to the lower 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).

Negotiate your per-word rate on the basis of the number of words in English. Word count of the same text in two different languages can differ by as much as 40 percent—this is especially true for Asian languages. Use the English version as the basis, regardless of whether it is the source or the target language. This practice ensures the word count is clear to all involved parties and no unpleasant surprises arise during invoicing.

Language dialects and idiomatic expressions

The use of one language varies greatly by region. For example, Spanish is used differently in Spain, South America, Mexico, Florida, and California. Choosing an appropriate regional variation allows you to address your audience in the language they're most comfortable with and avoids potential politically charged issues (as with mainland China versus Taiwan, or Croatia versus Serbia).

If your source language is English, think international from the beginning. Use "translatable" text that can be easily adapted for the target audience. Avoid culture-bound clichés or idiomatic expressions which won't be understood in other countries—baseball metaphors, for example, 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. Also avoid using symbols, visuals, puns and slogans.

Don't revise the text

After you receive the translation text, don't revise it without first 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.

Proof it before you publish it

Once you have your translation, get feedback from an end user in the target country. Share this feedback with your translation service provider, preferably before the translated text is finalized. Files and fonts can become altered in the publishing process. It's best to show the final product to your translation service provider before going to print or posting it online. Another good practice is to have the translation reviewed by an independent third party or another translation service provider, especially if you are working with a new 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 can also lead to the development of a long-term, profitable partnership. As the translation service provider gets to know your product or service intimately they will be able to cultivate a specially trained linguistic team allowing your company to streamline its communications.

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 Additional Tip Tuesday, April 15, 2008

Reviewer: Member [Raj Tahil](#) from Fairfield, New Jersey, United States - [See all my reviews](#)

We have found for translations that include industry or technical terms that it is useful to get a customer or distributor to provide a translation of the technical or industry terms. We also sometimes send the competitors brochures in the target language as reference materials. I agree that one should have the final product after formatting reviewed by the translator. We also try to get the distributor or customer to review the final product.

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