

A Guide to Purchasing Translation Services

Do you really need it translated?

The first thing to consider when thinking about translating materials is whether you really need to have them translated. In some cases, it might suffice to have an interpreter read the information to a client in his or her native language. This will not suffice, however, if many clients need the information over an extended period of time. You will actually save money by translating the information rather than scheduling an interpreter to read the information each time a client needs it.

If you do need to go the translation route, the next consideration is whether to translate all of the information. Is it possible to translate only especially relevant information, or produce shorter versions of documents for translation? Word count usually determines cost. Review your text before requesting a cost proposal. Does all the information apply to your foreign language audience? Can you eliminate or shorten sections without distracting from their purpose? Are there duplications in the document? Spending some time pre-planning and revising materials can produce significant cost savings in the end.

What do you really need?

To answer this question, start by determining the end use of the translation. Are you publishing a research article, writing an appointment reminder for a client, or just getting the gist of a foreign-language website? The end use of your translation will drive the translation services you need, as well as your budget.

End use will indicate the level of translation quality you require. Is accurate good enough, or do you want something polished, smart and stylish? How do you define “good enough?” In simplest terms, you will need to know if your end use is “for-information” or “for-publication.” “For-information” means that the translation is for comprehension only, and that your organization plans to use it for internal purposes alone. “For-publication” means that your clients and/or the public at large will read your translation. If “for-information” is your end use, then you may not need to pay for editing and/or proofreading services. If “for-publication” is your end use, you should budget for these services.

Another approach to determining what you need is to calculate how many people will be reading your translation. A publication read by thousands of readers will likely be more important to you than a letter going to one client. For a website or ads in a glossy magazine, it makes sense to purchase premium text. For documents with limited circulation, a less polished, less expensive option should be fine.

Quality is crucial.

How would a seriously flawed translation affect your organization’s image and/or legal liability? What would be the impact of your website if it was accurately translated, but presented your audience with boring, unstylish writing? What would happen if potential non-English speaking

clients took one look at your written materials in their language and decided your organization was not right for them? Translation requires a professional level of quality, like any other professional discipline.

How much will it cost?

Translation prices can vary significantly from one company or individual to another. While high prices do not necessarily guarantee high quality, the old adage that “you get what you pay for” has a place in the translation business as it does in any other.

To make sure that you receive an accurate cost proposal for your translation project, clearly define what you hope to accomplish with your translation and be able to communicate it explicitly. If the person you are dealing with is unable to recommend which services you need based on end use, or cannot clearly explain the recommendation, then it may be a very good idea to consider turning to another company or individual. The person you are dealing with should be able to give you options based on your budget, and a reputable company will tell you when your budget is not sufficient for your needs. In many cases, it is not a good idea to let cost alone drive your decision. If it becomes obvious from speaking to several companies that your budget will not cover what you hope to accomplish with your text, it might be best to postpone your project and plan a budget that will meet your needs.

Translation is a writing process. If a team of people produced your English text using a process that included editing, proofreading and expert review, then a team of people will need to complete the translation using a process that includes the same services. Remember that whether the text is in English or Spanish or Chinese, your organization’s credibility and professionalism are at stake. There is a difference between for-information and for-publication work. Make sure you know which you are paying for before authorizing the project.

Always be sure to get a very detailed picture of what you are paying for and exactly what to expect. ALWAYS ask for a cost proposal and/or contract in writing, even if you have worked with the translation company before.

How long will it take?

Professional translation companies will be able to tell you how long your project will take when creating your proposal. Trust the judgment of the translation project manager and try not to rush the project. Be realistic with your deadline. If it took three weeks for a team of people to write something in English, it is unrealistic to expect to receive a professional translation in three hours or perhaps even three days. To get the best results, plan well and allow the translation team more than enough time to deliver your project when you need it. “Rush” projects are an option but usually cost much more.

In addition, think in terms of how much time you want to spend on your end. The range of services that a translation company can offer (selecting translators, project management, quality control, file conversions, text layout, standardizing multilingual presentations, etc.) can save you hours of work. The extra expense of paying for a full suite of services may be worth your while. Though delivery from the company may take longer with the post-translation

services included, the project will likely take less time overall since you will receive the translation ready for its end use.

Identify your audience.

Carefully identifying your audience in advance will help you decide what to translate and will likely save you time and money while increasing the usability and success of your translations. Do you need Spanish for clients in Madrid or Mexico City? Does your audience speak British or American English? Are your readers college-educated or low-literacy? Are they physicians or patients?

Speak your reader's language. Identify their needs in order to determine how your services or information can serve their needs. If you spend time making sure that your English language materials will meet the needs of your average English-language client, then you should spend equal time making sure that your foreign-language materials meet the needs of your average foreign-language client.

Think multilingual from the start.

Read text carefully before sending it for translation. How adaptable is it for other languages? Is the content culture bound? Does the text contain idiomatic expressions that only someone from your geographic region or profession will understand? Are the images you chose for your English readers appropriate for your foreign language readers? Is the literacy level appropriate for the foreign language audience you hope to target?

Preparing materials that lend themselves to good translation will significantly increase the usability and impact of your translated materials.

A picture is worth a thousand words.

Good use of images (pictures, diagrams, graphs, maps and other visual media) can prove very effective in any written materials. Your materials will be more visually dynamic and therefore project a more positive and memorable image of your organization. If your audience is low literacy, images may increase the reader's comprehension of your materials. At times, images can replace or text sections, or decrease the amount of text required, by conveying the same messages visually. Good use of images can also help with your translation budget: since there will be less text to translate, the cost will be less.

Finalize your text before starting the translation.

Tempting as it may be to begin your translation project as quickly as possible, having translators work from a draft-in-progress will almost always be more time-consuming and expensive than if you were to send a finalized source document. If your deadlines do not allow for this, make sure to formalize a plan for flagging text revisions so that translators can easily

identify where changes have occurred and can efficiently make equivalent changes in the translated text.

Know what you hope to accomplish with your translation.

Style, word choice, reading level and register will all vary depending on where your text will appear and what you want it to achieve. A good translation project manager will ask you about these things. Make sure you know the right answers. Be sure to identify the audience and end use for your translation before you approach a company or individual for services, so they will know how to prepare a foreign-language version with maximum impact for your particular audience and end use.

Resist the temptation to do it yourself.

Your organization might have bilingual staff, but this does not necessarily mean that your organization has the resources to produce professional quality translations. Good translators are most often college educated professionals with exemplary writing skills and advanced training for their trade. Like all professionals, translators need preparation and experience to do a good job. Unless your business is translation, or your organization recruits, assesses and hires an in-house team of professional translators, you will need to outsource your translation projects to get them done well.

“Bilinguals” are not necessarily “translators.”

Professional translators are skilled writers, capable of producing texts that read well in their native language. They are fluent in your language as well. They are trained and experienced and will do a good job at rendering text in the language of your target audience, with appropriate style and terminology.

Bilingualism is something else. Bilinguals speak two languages fluently, but are not necessarily good at moving information between the two, especially in writing. Moreover, people who describe themselves as bilingual may over-estimate their level of fluency in their second language (true bilingualism means equal comfort and skill speaking, listening, reading and writing BOTH languages).

If you want to consider a bilingual staff person for your translation projects, begin by verifying their skills with an expert assessment and then provide professional development opportunities so the individual can become acquainted with translation industry issues. Bilingualism on its own is not a guarantee of written fluency or skill in translation.

Should you use translation software?

In October 2000, the Wall Street Journal gave two automatic translation programs a test run and concluded:

“These services are passable for travelers or for those wanting to translate a letter from a distant cousin. I definitely wouldn’t use them for business or anything that remotely requires accuracy.”

Careful editing of machine translations by skilled human translators is an option, although not all translators will accept such assignments. Many insist that texts generated by computer programs are so bad that it is faster to start from scratch. They may even charge more to edit machine translations than they would charge for a routine translation job. In any case, if your goal is a quality translation, software alone will not suffice.

Should you use teachers or students?

Would you approve of students performing minor operations to pay their way through medical school? Would you have your company’s financial statements prepared by business students to save money? Would you hire an English professor from a local college or university to write your company’s web site?

Teaching a foreign language is a demanding activity that requires a special set of skills. However, the skills needed to produce professional, quality translations are quite different. By hiring a teacher, you risk hiring the wrong person for the job. The risk is even greater if you opt for bilingual students, who may lack any professional experience and who may be rather undeveloped linguists and writers.

The more technical your subject, the more qualified the translators need to be.

If you supply information to five native speakers of any language and ask them each to write a 100-word description of your services, you will get five texts, some clearer and more readable than others. People familiar with what you do are likely to produce a better text. The same applies to translators.

If your text deals with the services of trained professionals who went to school many years to learn about what they do at work each day, then you need to find translators who specialize in your field or who became translators after working in your industry. Familiarity is essential, and at times advanced training and knowledge are crucial to precise translations.

Literary translators may not be qualified to translate medical texts. Legal translators may do a very poor job of translating novels. Within the translation industry, there are translators and translation companies that specialize in working with your industry. Find them. It will make all the difference.

Technical subjects pose challenges for any writer.

Specialists writing on technical subjects face special challenges. Incorrect or non-standard use of technical terms, awkward changes of register and monotonous use of certain words are just a few issues to overcome. It should come as no surprise that technical translators face the

same issues and must be on their toes to make sure that their work reads at least as well as the original, if not better.

A good idea is to use in-house specialists to provide vocabulary and background materials to writers and translators. If by chance you have bilingual staff, a good way to use their skills is to have them review the final copy of the translation and to suggest changes if necessary. However, always go back to the company or translator for those changes before going to press (a good translation company will include any necessary final revisions in the standard cost of a project). Your staff may be able to highlight terminology or technical errors, but the translators will be best for looking at revisions in terms of grammar, syntax, punctuation and style.

A translator who asks questions is a good translator.

No one reads your texts more carefully than translators do. Along the way, they are likely to identify sections that require clarification. Good translators strip down sentences entirely before creating new ones in the target language. They ask questions along the way. This is good news for you, since it may help you to improve your source language documents.

Work closely with the translation project manager and/or translators. Make sure to respond to their questions and requests for clarifications. Pass the information on to the individual or team who wrote the original version of the document and encourage them to revise it accordingly.

Have typeset copy proofread by a translator.

Even if you have graphic designers in place and you would prefer to handle text layout in-house, you should still send the copy to a translator for final proofreading. If you receive text in MS Word and the output is QuarkXpress, inadvertent changes can occur during typesetting that undermine the readability of the text. Misplaced headings or paragraphs, improper word or line breaks and font incompatibilities are just a few potential problems. If you are going to put resources into professional publication of your text, the extra expense of a final copy check by a qualified linguist is pivotal to assuring its success.

Typographical conventions vary from one language to another.

French has a space between a word and the colon that follows, and writes quotation marks «». In German, nouns take capital letters. In Spanish and French, neither months nor days of the week take an initial capital. In Spanish, it is essential to know the difference between an "n" and an "ñ"...

An article in the translation magazine *The Chronicle* highlighted a case in which a bilingual banner in the U.S. celebrated 100 *anos* of municipal history. *Años* means years; *anos* means anuses.

Many printers and office staff are unaware of how typesetting conventions change from one language to another, or do not take it seriously. Many automatically "adjust" foreign-language texts to bring them into line with their own standards, producing glitches. Even if each

typesetting glitch is minor, the cumulative effect is to lose credibility with foreign-language readers. This alone may warrant paying a translation company for typesetting services.

How do you settle on one company over another?

Always ask for project samples from any translation companies you consider—not just client names, but specific texts they have produced. If a company is bidding on a localization project for your website, ask to see web sites they have previously localized. Do the same for brochures and forms and any other type of project. Run the samples by a trusted and professional person who speaks and reads the language very fluently. If translation companies have been in business for a number of years and cannot show you any good work, you would likely be in trouble if you used them. So would they.

Talk to contacts at any company you are considering. What is their process? What are the qualifications of their translators? How long have they been in business? What other services do they offer? Do they have client references? Get to know a translation company before sending a project.

It is a good idea to tell the company that their name will appear with the text they produce. Printing such credits in your document costs nothing and encourages companies to deliver top-quality work.

Once you have done your homework, trust your decision.

Do your homework and find a reputable, professional translation company. If you do so, the company you choose will be working hard to establish a long-term relationship with your organization. If you choose a good company, you can expect that quality assurance will happen on their end and that you will not need to verify the quality of their work each time they deliver a project.

More importantly, unless you have trained bilingual editors or reviewers on staff, do not make changes to delivered translations without first running them past the translation project manager. Likewise, do not authorize others in your organization to make changes without doing the same. The translation company will likely have a contract stipulation regarding changes made after delivery to protect their reputations from improper changes at your end. This is in everyone's best interest. Accept it immediately.

Get involved.

With translation, your projects will likely suffer if you do not get involved in the process. If you do not invest time to brief the translation project manager, there is little chance that you will get what you want or need.

It may take longer than simply telling your assistant to “get this translated,” but spending some time talking to your translation project manager will probably save money and stress further down the line. Your organization may also wish to consider developing a glossary of key terms

and concepts that factor into your written materials. The glossary will help the translators achieve a higher rate of consistency in your translated materials and, at the same time, it will help your organization achieve a greater level of consistency in your English language materials. Moreover, it will help the translators gain a deeper understanding of your services. Not only will they do a better job at getting it right, your extra work will really pay off with non-English speaking clients who come to you already knowing what you can offer them.

Adapted from *Translation – Getting It Right: A Guide to Buying Translations*,
published by the American Translators Association.
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