

## Respect versus money in the translation business



The relationship between translators and translation companies has always been controversial. I have been in this business for 14 years now, and though I feel like I have seen all there is to see, there is one situation that continues to catch my attention. In too many cases, translators ask translation companies for greater respect because they feel undervalued, but they miss a crucial point: companies want to talk in terms of customer satisfaction and money because this is the core of their business.

Many translators often think of their jobs in terms of pride in their work, and they constantly stress that they are professionals. This is true everywhere you go, but the reality is that in a broad number of cases, our clients do not really care about translations. They just need them, and they realize they need them only when the problem arrives at their desks. When faced with strategic planning, seldom do our clients schedule the translation phase into their workflow.

There is a huge difference in the perception of translations, which is what translation companies buy and translators sell, and it clearly depends on the point of view. As I already stated, translators basically want respect, and clients want to talk money. The dangerous implication here is that too many translators view themselves as intellectuals, get stuck on the respect issue and sometimes lose sight of the concrete context in which they have to operate. Translators like to think of their profession as something different, somehow more important than other jobs, and they spend a lot of time trying to persuade their clients of this.

### Professionalism in translation

Respect, professionalism, ethics – I believe that all these concepts should be taken for granted. I want to talk business! Yes,

I want to form strategic alliances with our first-rate translators, but the market has to be taken into the equation. For example, many software packages really help translators in their repetitive tasks and can be seen as either a threat or a huge aid. The choice is theirs. If they choose to embrace technology, translators can concentrate on the tasks that really matter.

In general, IT and translation have become more and more intertwined. The world is changing rapidly, and this is where the real challenge lies, rather than in ethics. The real challenge is how to identify the relatively small number of professionals in translation, and the answer lies in examining their qualities.

The first quality is IT aptitude. An excellent book on the subject, *Bit Literacy* by Mark Hurst, was released in 2007. The main topics in the book are how technology can improve our lives; why we cannot be technologically illiterate anymore; and how to protect ourselves from e-mail overload. In particular, I found the final chapter very helpful. It is dedicated to the future of technology and states that the ability to manage bits can make the difference between survival and success in software changes. What is new today will be obsolete tomorrow, but human beings will always be at the heart of this world.

The second quality is promptness in delivery. Since translation is a small gear in the production flow of a company, any delay will affect the work of others. It is crucial that when a deadline is set and accepted, it must be met.

The third quality is professionalism and courtesy. Be able to answer the telephone personally. How annoying is it to call and hear a five-year-old child say "Hello"? Always be (more or less!)

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available in working hours. Answer with a smile. It's amazing how a smile can be perceived over the phone. Also, send accurate and timely invoices.

The fourth quality is treating each customer differently. For example, differentiate prices instead of sending a single price list to your entire address book at the beginning of the year.

The final feature is giving feedback in order to deepen and enrich the relationship. Here is a real-life example. We recently gave a translator negative but precise feedback regarding a project. There were typing errors in the file, misunderstandings and so forth — not small issues. She sent an e-mail merely making note of it and hoping to have further opportunities in the future. But why? The value of feedback is undeniable — life itself can be seen as an enormous feedback loop that we constantly give each other. This was an opportunity to pick up the phone and apologize, and in the meantime try to better understand what the customer wanted, how to respond to his or her needs in the future and so on. An e-mail like this stops any kind of communication, and the damage is twofold: to this particular project and, more importantly, to the future relationship with that client. In short, a missed opportunity.

Let's now examine the other side of the fence, the translation company or "the enemy," as some might say. Let's consider the features that make a translation company owner a real pro. The word *enemy* reminds me of an expression we have in Italian that goes *Ho guardato il nemico negli occhi, ed ero io*. This translates as "I looked my enemy in the eye and saw myself." It's impressive just how often we can be our own worst enemy.

We can be professional owners and translators if and only if we:

1. Act as entrepreneurs. This means talking about money, sales, opportunities and threats.
2. Solve problems and offer solutions to our customers. This means that we talk in terms of the benefits and not of the characteristics of the services we sell.
3. Stay informed of what happens around us. This means, more precisely, that we apply a selective ignorance in order to only check the sources that really matter.

### A possible escape

How can we reach a healthy compromise between supply and demand, clients and translators? I believe that translation company owners can be the real translators if they are able to talk to their clients on their own terms (business economics) and to translators on their terms (quality and respect), but in the latter case, only after having skimmed the databases showing which translators are real professionals. Yes, we have to work only with real professionals because our output depends mainly on the translators' work. Consequently, it also means that focusing on price may not be the best option for us.

Herein lies the real opportunity: to be the link between the production and the sales department, to connect two worlds that struggle to communicate because they speak different languages. Let's assume that for us the economic side of the profession is a given. What about translators? The closer they come to this rationale, the more fruitful working with them will be. This is certainly not an easy task for them because it might mean learning a new language (the business one), but the future of the profession and the market is at stake.

To achieve this, I want to pay translators more, not less. Alas, this is not

always possible, though it is definitely feasible more often than we might think. But I want to pay this higher price in exchange for excellent holistic service. I mean assistance before, during and after the mere delivery of the translation. This is to say, for example, that the translator has to be fully equipped with the software needed for that job, must be reachable after the delivery for clarifications if needed and so on. In short, I want a service that is based on the five qualities listed above.

Unfortunately, in too many cases I have been unable to obtain this desired level of service. The impression that I have been left with is that the translator tries to obtain the highest possible price without really reflecting on the difference in the quality of the service provided. But if the cycle of quality works, then all the parties involved will benefit from the transaction. The translator can make a decent living off the work, I get impeccable service and my client is delighted.

By the way, a side effect of this circle is that the entrepreneur can dedicate less time to work and free up more time to do other, more interesting things — an advantage not to be underestimated. You should aim to finish your work as soon as possible and then go do whatever you love most. **M**

