

Buying Translations – A Brief Guide

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Buying Translations

Lost sales, missed opportunities, a damaged corporate image: if your foreign-language documentation is not up to scratch, your international ventures will be compromised.

Entering a foreign market can be difficult: unfamiliar business conventions and advertising cultures, different laws and regulations, and a foreign language can all put obstacles in the way.

This brief guide is designed to help you overcome these hurdles by helping you find the right translation vendor for your needs and maximising your chances of getting a translation that works.

Freelance or translation agency?

Translation vendors fall broadly into two categories. Which type can best meet your needs depends mainly on your specific requirements:

Freelance translators

Freelancers work independently, usually translating from one or more foreign languages into their native tongue. Some offer added value services, such as desktop publishing, voiceover, revision, or language consulting.

Advantages

All work is done by the same professional, which helps ensure consistency and allows the translator to become familiar with your business and products. Direct contact with the translator allows a close working relationship to be established.

Translation companies/agencies

Translation companies (TCs) provide translations completed and checked either in-house or (more often) using freelance translators. May offer added value services, such as typesetting, publishing, project management, or language consulting.

Advantages

TCs may have more comprehensive management resources for handling larger projects involving many languages. Some also provide a wider range of related services than many freelance translators (such as typesetting or pre-press).

Selecting a translation vendor

Whether you opt for a freelance or a translation company (TC), make sure that your translation vendor can fulfil the following criteria:

d **Expertise and subject knowledge** – most translators and many TCs specialise in a particular text type (e.g. technical, marketing) or subject (e.g. software localisation).

Technical resources – e-mail, specific word processor or DTP application, etc.

d **Experience** with comparable translation projects.

- 1 **Language skills** – in most cases, it is best to use translators with native-speaker competence in the target language
- 1 **Commitment to quality** – TCs may work to the DIN 2345 standard for translation ventures or be affiliated to a translators' organization, while freelance translators may be accredited or have formal qualifications. None of these guarantee quality, but – together with subject expertise – can be a useful guideline.
- 1 **Communication** – Use a translator or TC who is committed to good, effective communication.

The Whole Picture

The translation of a document is just one of many steps in its production. And like its texting, layouting, reviewing, typesetting, proofreading and printing, it takes time, resources and expertise.

It is therefore important to allow for translation in time and cost planning, and to include the translator in the production chain.

Here is a list of things you can do to maximize the value added by your translation vendor.

Applying just half of the suggestions on the following pages will significantly improve your chances of getting a translation that works.

Write with translation in mind

- A good translation starts with good source text!
- Write in a clear, unambiguous style.
- Avoid using idiomatic expressions and jargon.
- Avoid analogies and cultural, political or religious references that may be specific to a particular country or culture.
- Use consistent technical terminology.
- Don't use abbreviations without defining what they stand for unless you are sure they will be understood.
- Be aware that text may expand in translation, and account for this in the layout of your documents.

For a list of free online style guides, see the **Style Guides** page at www.trans-k.co.uk.

Provide a project brief

For each translation project, specify at least the following:

- The target readership (the general public, subject experts, prospective clients, etc.)
- Will the translation be used for information only (inbound – for personal/internal use only) or publication (outbound – sales literature, user manuals, tenders, etc.)
- The delivery deadline for the draft and/or the final copy
- The method of presentation/delivery (e-mail, fax, CD-ROM, file format, special formatting, etc.)

Project management

- Allow sufficient time for the translation: plan it well in advance.
- If possible, avoid starting translation before the original text is completed: last minute changes can prove costly.
- Provide assistance: appoint a contact person who can answer any questions the translator may have. Remember that no-one knows your products and services better than you, and you may be the translator's best source of information.

Provide the required information

Provide the translator with as much background information as possible. This is always useful, often essential, and may include:

- Related drawings
- Previous translations
- Glossaries
- Other published information about the product
- The address of your company's website

Finally

Provide feedback – an expert evaluation of the translation will improve all subsequent work.

Why use a Professional?

You may have studied a foreign language at school or university, even spent a year or more abroad. Does that mean you can produce good translations?

Here are four reasons why it may not:

False friends

The German noun “Tachometer”, refers to what in English is called a speedometer; German “vital” means healthy and full of life and energy, not – as the English word with the same spelling and etymology – “very important”.

The list of “false friends” is long. The table on the next page contains just a few further examples:

German	English
Garantie (e.g. on a product)	warranty
Gewährleistung	guarantee
Kontrolle (e.g. in process control)	monitoring, inspection
Regeln, Steuern	control
seriös (e.g. of a company)	reputable
ernst, ernsthaft	serious
Präservativ	contraceptive, condom
Konservierungsmittel	preservative
konsequent	consistent, determined
folglich	consequent(ly)
galvanisieren	electroplate
verzinken	galvanize
aktuell	current
tatsächlich, eigentlich	actual

Regional habits

This applies especially to English as the language of international communication and of fashion in non-English-speaking countries. Here, certain elements of the local language are sometimes applied to English so consistently that non-native-speakers no longer recognize them as mistakes. A typical example is the German custom of joining up words, which seems natural to naive German-speakers and is therefore often incorrectly applied to English in German-speaking countries.

“Accent”

Just as your accent will reveal your origin or native tongue when you speak, you will be immediately recognizable as a non-native once you put pen to paper. You may deliberately want to give your text a “foreign” feel, in which case doing the translation yourself may be the right choice. But in most cases, you will probably want to say to your readers or customers “We’re talking your language”.

Experience

Just as teaching a language effectively requires certain skills beyond the ability to speak and write it fluently, translators need skills to transfer the information and intention of a text into another language and cultural setting.

Conclusion

If cost is your main criterion, or the text will be used only within your company, the do-it-yourself approach can yield a sufficient quality; but if you want to project a professional and international image, get in touch with a translation vendor.

Further Reading

Further publications with information and advice about commissioning translations are available on the website of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting at www.iti.org.uk (click “Advice to Business”) and at the trans-k website at www.trans-k.co.uk.