

## The Business of Translating

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### The inevitable introduction...

Translation is a service business, not an industry or commerce. The basic difference between industry, commerce and services lies in *inventories*. Industrial establishments keep at least two kinds of inventory: raw materials and finished goods. Commercial establishments keep only finished goods inventories. Service establishments, however, keep no inventories.

An example will make this clear: a paint factory will keep inventories of raw materials (pigments, thinners, binding agents) and finished goods (paint); a hardware store will keep only inventories of finished goods (paint). A painter (service provider) will keep neither. Painters may keep inventories (brushes, for instance) but those are not for sale. What a painter sells is *painting services*, and services cannot be stacked in shelves because they are intangible.

Now, every product, tangible or intangible, can be compared with another product based on three parameters: **delivery time**, **quality** and **price**. Buying decisions are based on tradeoffs among those three parameters: Product A is very good, but too expensive. Product B is good and reasonably priced, but unfortunately they don't carry that brand at your local store and you do not have the time to look for it elsewhere. So you settle for Product C, which, in your opinion, offers the best balance of the three parameters at the time.

How does all that affect our business?

### ...time and tension...

Because we carry no inventories, clients who call us for a translation know they will find none. They also know they will find no "Product B" that will somehow meet their needs. Finally, they know that calling another translator will not help much, because nobody will have their translation ready for them.

So, they press for immediate service. Many translators complain that jobs go to the lowest bidder, but my experience is that the majority goes to lowest bidder *among those who offer the fastest turnaround.*

This creates a certain amount of tension between client and translator. Tension that is made worse by the fact that time devours itself: if a client needs a translation within 72 hours, each minute spent finding a translator reduces the time available to do the job. Once I was asked to translate five long annual reports within three days, a job I had to refuse. The desperate client called every agency in town and three of them called *me* - each of them with a shorter turnaround time: because deadlines are fixed, turnaround times must be flexible.

The problem seems to affect translators more strongly than other professionals. The other day I called my doctor for an appointment, and the first date available was a month later. Tell one of our clients it will have to wait a week and it will probably hang up on you. If I had an emergency, my doctor would tell me to look for help in a hospital: they all have emergency rooms these days. We cannot do that: as far as our clients are concerned, we *are* the emergency room.

Faster means of communication have made the situation even worse. When Brazilian companies airtailed information to their parent companies, they gave me a week to translate their annual reports. Now they e-mail everything and want same-day translations.

### *Why is pressure for short turnarounds so heavy?*

Pressure on translators is heavier than it is in other service businesses because the translator is often one of the last links in a very complex chain of events. For instance, we are the people who translate the specs required to bid for a government contract. We are the outsiders, called at the end of the process, when delays have been accumulating for months and everybody is on edge. Thus being, we cannot even fight for time: there isn't any time left to be fought for.

The people who prepare the specs *do their best* to prepare a great set of specs - but *we must do what it takes* to meet the delivery deadline. Therein lies the difference.

To make things worse, the average translation is getting bigger and bigger. A few months ago, I was offered a 1.4-million-word job. That is twice the size of the Bible. Turnaround 45 days, maximum. Of course, I declined.

Time pressures favor new entrants: sometimes the only person who can take the job is someone who actually never did a professional translation before. Unfortunately, this also means that someone's *opera prima* often is a rush job done without the benefit of appropriate equipment.

### ...questions of quality...

The constant pressure for fast service created by the lack of inventories has a deplorable impact on quality - we all know that. Often clients say time matters more than quality. The guy who wanted five reports in three days said he did not care: he just wanted a heap of paper he could show a government official in connection with a public bid. Nobody would read it, said he. Well, perhaps. But, no matter what the client says, someone would have a look at the job sometime and say "Look at this mess! And we paid this guy a premium for the garbage." So, I said no to the job and goodbye to a very large fee. I do not regret it.

But the point I would like to make is different. Because we have no inventories, clients cannot possibly test our product for quality. When they contact us, they find not a *product*, but a *potential*. And potentials cannot be tested for quality.

Clients can ask for samples of past work or for tests - when there is time for that, which is not often. In any case, many translators refuse to do tests and, since most of our work is confidential, we often cannot provide samples. And, finally, tests and samples are so easily faked that some clients do not even bother to ask.

Quality has to be evaluated indirectly, based on what we have done for that client or for someone he knows. This procedure favors experienced translators and is thus hated by new entrants, who would like to see clients giving a newcomer a deserved break. I deeply sympathize with newcomers and their plight, but let us remember that this is exactly the method we use when, for instance, we need a doctor: we prefer the experienced doctor who helped aunt Jane out of her illness to the young promising

doctor just out of medical school.

### ...the problem of price...

A surprisingly large number of people claims that for every product there is a *fair price* based on its cost. In fact, prices result from the play between supply and demand and bear no relationship to costs. The difference between price and cost is often called *margin*. If your margin is high and your volume is also high, you make a good profit. Otherwise, you don't. No business bases its prices on costs. Everybody - including us - charges as much as they can and cuts costs to the absolute minimum in order to maximize margins. If they cannot make a profit, they will try some other business. That is the way the law of supply and demand works.

All this may seem outrageous, but it is borne out by the fact that translators, especially new entrants, are always eager to know *how much to charge* - not *how much it costs*. In addition, we must keep in mind that because translation is a labor-intensive activity, most of our fees cover labor and, because most of us are independent operators, labor means what we pay ourselves. Now, what we pay ourselves is not a cost; a cost is what we pay to the other guy.

Prices are based on supply and demand, but buying decisions are based on a comparison between competing products, which, in turn, is based on delivery times, quality and price considerations. Because time is usually so pressing, it often weighs more than quality in translation purchase decisions.

In addition, many buyers see translation as a commodity - that is, as a standard product, such as 23-carat gold, which should have a standard price. The notion is reinforced by the fact that most translators will quote fees and delivery times on any job sight unseen. Many translators will even quote prices on their home pages: so much per word, no matter what. If we treat translations as a commodity, we can hardly condemn our clients for doing the same.

Small wonder clients base their purchasing decisions on the hallowed method of "get three quotes and award contract to lowest bidder." Of course, this should be construed as "lowest bidder among those offering short turnarounds," for if you cannot handle the job immediately, you are automatically excluded from the process.

No use trying to convince a client my translation offers better quality: all translators claim that. That brings us back to the no-inventory problem, the main thread underlying this article: quality only comes into consideration after the translation is

received and examined. If those who bargained for the lowest prices and shortest turnaround times, complain at this point that the job was very poorly done, it is too late.

### ...and the inevitable Internet.

You cannot really write an article on the business of translation these days without mentioning the Internet. How does the Big Net affect our business?

Basically, the Net has made us omnipresent. Five years ago, a company in Guatemala that wanted a translation from Hungarian into Spanish might have a hard time finding a translator. Now, it can access the Internet and find a translator in a matter of minutes or hours, although not necessarily a good one. In addition, this translator may live in Argentina, if she prefers the pampas to the puszta.

The other side of this coin is that a translator can no longer hold sway over a number of clients just because she (most translators are female) is the only one in the area who can cope a given language.

This particular coin seems to have three sides, not two. For the omnipresence allowed by the Internet will also end with all dreams of restricting entry into the profession to a small number of "legally qualified" persons. This is known as "closed shop" and, although many of its advocates are honest people who see it as a form of "consumer protection," it is often just a ploy to increase prices by restraining competition, very much like the rules imposed by the medieval craft guilds. Because translations can move so fast over the Internet, if a closed shop environment is established in any country, translators who have been excluded could easily go on working through agencies in some other country and continue living where they have always lived.

Not that I believe closed shops would benefit translators in any way, mind you, but that is another long, long, story, which I may approach in a future article.

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