



## Need a Brochure or Manual in Another Language? Here's How to Hire a Professional Language Firm

*Robert E. McLean, CAE*

What would you do if tomorrow you decided that you needed a brochure, website, package, or other materials for employees, customers, or prospects whose first language was something other than English—who have what the language industry refers to as LEP (limited English proficiency)? Or what if your customers said they needed several standardized documents from you but wanted them in Spanish and Chinese?

The answer is to use many of the same processes used when hiring a consultant or contracting for any service. Write a detailed request for proposal (RFP), look for professional firms with good reputations and references, negotiate the best possible rates, and sign a contract that calls for a specific product by a specific date within a narrow price range.

### **Developing an RFP**

This first step is the most critical. One mistake made by most buyers of translation (the written word) or interpretation (the spoken word) services, is underestimating the level of detail needed when hiring a language company, which will reduce the margin of errors or embarrassing cultural mistakes. You can avoid such problems by hiring a firm who specializes in translation

for your industry or service area, and by outlining exactly what you need done. (Because most companies most often need translation help more than interpretation, I focus on this type of work in the article. For help developing an RFP for an interpretation project, send an email to [info@alcus.org](mailto:info@alcus.org).)

There are several factors that can make a translation project more complex than might appear to be the case. Here are some of the ways clients often underestimate the complexity of their projects:

- You fail to mention that there are graphics with callouts, flow charts and tables, all of which can significantly increase the time required to produce a translated document.
- Did you ask if the translation is for the US or overseas market.
- Do you require just a translation of the text in MS Word, or typesetting to produce output for the printer.
- You forget that you need help proofreading the formatted brochure to ensure that accented characters, hyphenation and line breaks are all correct.
- You later decide you need the project in more than one language.

To ensure an accurate RFP, be as accurate and complete as possible:

- Include samples, preferably a PDF if available, of the types of materials you want translated.
- Indicate the programs and versions the source documents were created in and whether it is for a PC or MAC.
- Indicate the programs and versions the target documents should be provided back to you.
- Clearly describe the number of words and pages, the subject matter, and condition or legibility of the source materials.
- Indicate whether the source documents are plain text and if they include graphics, mathematical formulas or scientific characters.

### **Choosing a language company**

As with buying any services, a good first step is to ask for recommendations from ASAE members through one of the listservs, or to look for language firms that are ASAE members. Also, ask friends and colleagues that have purchased translation services and were satisfied with the results (those in the legal and medical fields hire language firms quite often). But it's even more important to find firms that have industry specific experience and in the languages you require—and have translated similar types of documents.

Once you identify several prospects, compare more than their prices. First, ask them to explain how they ensure delivery of an accurate translation. What are the minimum requirements of their translators and interpreters regarding their education, credentials and experience? What quality control steps will they take to ensure the end product is accurate?

Second, ask for details about how they handle administrative issues. For example, do they use standardized contracts with their customers? How do they handle estimates? How are requests for reviews and complaints handled?

One question that always offers misleading information is this: How many employees do you have? Most language firms employ independent translators, not employees, who may live across town, across the country, or on another continent. This hiring practice helps ensure you get the people with the background and quality you need, when you need them, and at the best possible price.

### **How language companies charge for their work**

Aside from references and quality control processes, price obviously matters. Comparisons can sometimes be easier than expected, especially for simple documents. That's because most firms charge by the word for translation and editing and by the page for typesetting.. Most companies will also quote you a total project price (based on an approved estimate), especially for complex ones such as bilingual forms or any type of legal document that uses industry-specific terminology. If there are differences from one vendor proposal to another, it is likely that there were some variables one vendor addressed in their proposal and the other vendor left out because they were not specifically outlined in the RFQ.

### **Whatever the language, you will need more**

With the exception of the character (Asian) and some Germanic languages, many translations will almost always need more—more pages for a book or brochure or more space on a website. That's because translation from English to Romance

languages have a textual expansion rate of up to 30% over the source materials.)

A translation project, if it's your first, will most likely just take more time than you expected. Why does it take so long? Because translation projects typically involve the work of more than one translator. Every translation is edited by a second person. They may also involve typesetters and proofreaders, graphic designers, website managers and database programmers (if, for example, you're translating a directory of association members' names that's posted on a website). Such work takes time to coordinate with multiple quality checks among the project team members under the supervision of the Project Manager.

So for a quality product, give yourself the time needed to prepare a complete RFP and give your professional language company the time it needs to produce an accurate, professional translation.