

Do You Need a Translator? Make Sure People Understand Your Message

Be certain that people from other cultures get the point of your communications.

By Matt Baird

Even if you don't work with anyone outside your country's borders, you're bound to have employees, clients, and other stakeholders from different cultures. It's important to consider the value of adapting your documents to assure that communication is as fluid as it can be.

Whenever you prepare any communications for your organization – whether hard copy, website material, or social media messages – consider the people from other cultures who will likely read them. To make sure they “get” your message, you may want to find someone to help you translate the material. Getting it right will determine the success or failure of what you're doing – whether it's a high-profile marketing campaign intended for millions or a highly nuanced message aimed at your internal team.

Make the Decision

Deciding whether you need professional translators isn't always easy. Asking the right questions can make all the difference. Here are five queries to assure that you make the best decisions for your organization:

DOES IT NEED TO BE TRANSLATED?

This is the first and most important question you need to ask yourself. Pull your team together to decide what you actually need. You'd be surprised which parts you can cut right from the get-go. Organizations that deal with other countries have been known to trim hundreds of pages off their documentation by consulting translators, who can help flag the parts that aren't applicable.

Hello Здравейте **Hola** Добры дзень مرحبا
 Γεια σας স্বাস্তী Përshëndetje **Bonjour** Kaixo
Hei Kaabo Dial duit **Ciao**
 Alo മിറാസ്മുസ് नमस्ते ಸಹಜಾಠಿ Pozdravljeni
ಹಲೋ Saluton Helló 你好 ಹಲೋ
Olá Hej Ahoj Sveiki Fuprti 2tq
 Salve Tere Здравствуйтe Sannu
 வணக்கம் こんにちは Cześć
Merhaba Salam 안녕 하세요 شوخ
 Chao Hallå ह्यालe T Te āheitanga katoa
हेलो Habari Bonjour హలో Hallo שׁלום **Ola**

IS IT “FOR-INFORMATION-ONLY” OR “FOR-PUBLICATION”?

Next, ask yourself this: Is style important, or is technical accuracy a greater priority than a polished shine? Chances are, if you're trying to persuade or if image is a big concern, accuracy alone won't suffice. An inexperienced translator may deliver a translation that's accurate yet overly influenced by the original language, resulting in clunky sentences and awkward vocabulary. An experienced specialist can ensure your translations read like original content written by a native speaker.

Be aware that some translation suppliers sell for-information-only quality at for-publication prices. So, be sure to clarify that point up front. Even if your translation is just for internal purposes, your training materials likely need a for-publication level of quality.

HOW BIG IS YOUR AUDIENCE?

One approach is to calculate how many people will be reading your content. Are you preparing a nationwide campaign or an in-house memo? Would an awkward or even flawed translation affect your organization's image? Might it even lead to legal liability issues? It's absolutely vital to have your widely-read external communications professionally translated into the languages of those who will be reading them. For in-house documents with limited circulation, you may want to choose a less expensive option.

HOW TECHNICAL OR SPECIALIZED IS IT?

You may think that technical content is easy to translate. It's not poetry and the terms are in the dictionary, right? Think again. The more technical and specialized your subject matter, the more your translators need to know it inside and out. Poorly written technical content often means that translators were in over their heads. And though it may seem logical to ask someone in your organization – your bilingual engineer, for instance – to do the translating, such a person likely lacks the years of training necessary to transfer written information between two languages.

On the other hand, don't overlook the value of your bilingual employees. They are great assets. Put them in direct contact with the translator to help answer questions. Have them work with the translator to create a bilingual glossary of technical terms.

“More and more often, your material is likely to be received by people from other cultures.”

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT?

You may have a target audience of just one, but if that one person is vital to your organization's success, then do-it-yourself or for-information-only translations simply won't do. You might not even know how bad it is if it's a language you don't understand. But the recipient of your message will.

Take Control of the Controllable

A great translation — even for internal purposes — can have a huge impact. So take charge from the start by studying your options. Look for translators with subject-matter expertise, and involve them in the planning stages. Get your own people involved so you know what you need.

Always ask yourself whether people from other cultures will end up reading your material. Avoid miscommunication by using clear, unambiguous language. Produce glossaries that define confusing or obscure words and terminology. Don't use jargon. Stay away from humor, because what seems funny to you often won't translate well and may even be offensive to people from other backgrounds.

Translation, like language itself, is full of complexities. Taking the time to make good translation decisions will pay off in the end. 

Matt Baird is a professional German-to-English translator with over 15 years of experience. He also serves as a speaker for the American Translators Association (atanet.org), which represents over 10,000 translators and interpreters across 91 countries.

Gaining a Global View

If you haven't yet expanded beyond your own borders, you may be passing up some valuable opportunities. A broader cultural perspective can reap great rewards, including more supporters and a whole new source of funding. For more on adapting to other cultures, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

Is Your Organization Culturally Competent? (Vol. 26, No. 6)

Make the Overseas Leap to Raise More Funds (Vol. 21, No. 5)

Nonprofits Going Global: Opportunities and Problems from a Communicator's Perspective (Vol. 13, No. 6)

Is It Time for You to Go International? (Vol. 16, No. 3)

Managers Must Become Multicultural (Vol. 20, No. 6)

Diversity Is an International Issue (Vol. 16, No. 4)

The Skill Every Fundraiser Needs: Cultural Wisdom (Vol. 34, No. 3)