Successful Proposal Translation Strategies
Proven Guidance for Approaching Multi-Language Bids

By Theodora Landgren

An increasing number of US-based companies are focusing on international business and many of them are seeking outside translation services to enhance their global proposals. Consequently, it is very important to carefully plan and develop a translation strategy that can produce a successful multilingual proposal. Although it is a challenging process, developing such a strategy is critical to winning international contracts.

Requirements Analysis

To begin the process, you should first identify your proposal’s translation needs. Uncovering the translating issues is the starting point to finding a viable solution to your multilingual bid. Whether you are using an in-country agent or your own subsidiary in the targeted country, find out whether the Request for Proposals (RFP) will be in English, the foreign language, or both. Will you need to have the RFP translated just to understand the requirements? If so, then a rapid turnaround time is often necessary before the proposal team can start work developing the solution and articulating the content.

A 600-page requirements document might need to be translated accurately within a matter of days. Finding a good company with an experienced team of professional translators, who are available and who have expertise in the subject matter, is not an easy task. Start finding a translation company as early as possible!

How Many Languages?

The next issue is determining whether the proposal must be in one or multiple languages. Do you need to prepare the proposal in English, in a foreign language, or in both languages? One language will most likely take precedence, and the other, while required, is not the legally binding version. Ask your in-country agent which language takes precedence.

Of course, this issue will affect further decisions. What is the exact timeline for final submission? Will proposals in both languages be delivered simultaneously, or will you get an exten-
When writing for international proposal evaluators, you should follow some basic principles. Remember that translators are your most avid readers. They will scrutinize your document thoroughly, digesting every word and phrase and composing a version in their native language that conveys the proper meaning and nuance of your original. To help them, be clear and succinct in writing. Avoid the passive voice and ambivalent dependent clauses that might be misconstrued. Use a direct, simple writing style and short sentences. In preparing proposal text for translation, I recommend the following:

- List all acronyms, abbreviations, technical terms, product terms, industry terms, corporate terms, and words that are not to be translated.
- Avoid ambiguous writing by listing and explaining everything in detail.
- Do not use upper case letters to emphasize a particular action, especially in noun phrases (e.g., in the German language all nouns are capitalized).
- Be consistent in spacing and punctuation as this allows the software tool to reuse phrases and sentences that have already been translated. The software tools often detect punctuation as a change.
- Choose the design template for your proposal. Every desktop publishing software application offers templates, and, whatever your design, it should be used consistently by all writers. Otherwise, the software translation tool may not easily identify similar text strings and reuse the legacy translation, which will minimize the effective use of the software tool and make the process longer, more inefficient, and more inconsistent. Excessive editing, reformattting and proofreading might be necessary, thus increasing the Bid & Proposal expense for translation.
- Leave white space. A general rule of thumb is to leave 30 percent white space per page, with consideration also given to the matching of text and graphics on certain pages. This recommendation is tied to the natural expansion of language. From time to time, tune the 30 percent white space and see if it can be reduced with no adverse effects on readability.
- Avoid graphics with hand gestures, animals, symbols, and people.
- Research the appropriate colors for all your target markets.
- Cull all logistics information that is not applicable outside the US, such as 800 telephone numbers, hours of operation for support services, lists of your US local offices, US-specific warranties, and US regulatory information. Each country will have its own corresponding replacements. Your local representatives and legal advisors should provide you with the specific data for each country.
- Remember the principle for clarity is “ONE WORD = ONE MEANING.” Since words can have several meanings, try to simplify your text by keeping the words with one meaning isolated and use this term consistently throughout the text.
- Decide whether or not to translate product nomenclature and service terminology. This is often determined by the corporate culture. International companies frequently keep product names in the source language. Marketing personnel may decide whether the product name is acceptable in the target country. Remember the story when Chevrolet tried to sell the Chevy Nova in a Spanish-speaking country. They found, to their horror, that Nova means “Doesn’t go.”
- While planning format and layout, consider whether each page will adapt to eventual reproduction in international sizes and is not locked into 8-1/2” x 11” format. The majority of international markets uses the A4 size, which is a little longer and more narrow than the US format. Also, international ring binders differ in the number of holes and hole spacing than US binders.
- When using icons, be aware that while these differ across borders, there are many international symbols that are universally acceptable. However, remember a mailbox in the US looks very different from a mailbox in the United Kingdom.
- Be aware that date and address formats differ from locale to locale. Many countries use the 24-hour clock, and the day/month/year order is the internationally accepted date format outside the US.
- Be aware that numerical values are presented differently in various languages, e.g. $1,222,333.00 in English, $1,222,333,00 in German or Spanish, and $1 222 333,00 in French.
- Avoid constrictive framed, boxed, or columnar copy (in tabular column headings, include extra vertical space).
- Design as much extra character spacing as possible in the graphics. Otherwise, the translator may have to resort to awkward abbreviations and stylistic acrobatics, sacrificing the readability and user friendliness of the original.
- If you plan to open the translated desktop published electronic file that you received from your translator on your computer, use a desktop publishing program that incorporates international dictionaries so that your hyphenation will not be distorted. If you have made any changes to the final translated document, let your translator proofread it before printing.

Following these basic principles results in an additional benefit to good translations: a good portion of initial translations, already available when you are updating the document, can be easily recycled.

Translation Memory Software Tools

Translation Memory (TM) tools help to maintain consistency, enhance productivity, and facilitate the reuse of previously translated similar texts. The two most common and very useful software tools used by all reputable agencies are transla-
tion memory databases and terminology databases. These tools have improved a great deal since the early 1990s. They can now align or match parallel texts sentence for sentence in multiple languages.

Unlike machine translation, human interaction is incurred at every step. Most of the formatting codes are locked and can be hidden so that the translator and editor only see and translate the text presented in a split screen mode. As revisions are made, the location of each text piece can easily be located and translated to continuously update the target language text. Because redundancies are automatically identified and displayed, the translators can see how the text was previously translated in the same document and determine whether or not to use the same translation.

Online glossaries and term lists are attached to the TM where they are given hierarchical preference to supply available terms to the translator. These may be glossaries that were developed over time from other translation projects, or a client-specific glossary that is continually updated during the translation itself. This enhances translator productivity and gives the translation a better chance at consistency.

When working with large texts, translators work on translator workstations, and the entire project is organized and compiled on the manager’s workstation. Each person works on his or her part of the text, but the entire document can only be modified by the manager. This seems like a bonus when translating large texts, but it has some limitations. Ideally, the original text should already be in final format in order to retain the formatting. Once the translation is complete and compiled, the manager exports it back into the original format, and, with the format codes preserved, you have a foreign language document closely approximating the original.

Since TM is not exact, adjustments must be made to fix the formatting. Some key points to remember are: (1) determine in the original what format you will have (i.e., A4 or other); (2) leave 30 percent white space on every page if you require a page-for-page identical document because the text might well expand when converted into the target language; (3) format using an appropriate design template; and (4) do not forget that space for expanding graphics needs to be considered. This brings us to graphics considerations.

**Graphics Issues**

Some advice regarding graphics:

- All icons and graphics, other than technical specifications and product drawings, should be preliminarily reviewed in the target country.

- Avoid placing text within your graphics. I cannot emphasize this enough. Editing graphics that are bitmaps can be tedious and very time-consuming. It is virtually impossible to estimate the time it might take to edit some complex graphics. If you have strict deadlines, this might cause delays. You should make every effort to supply original graphics, whether in Corel, PhotoShop, or CADCAM. If you want to vary image-editing changes across frames, you can hide or show the layer with the image-editing changes separately in each frame.

- There are four general categories of imagery that can introduce cultural conflict:
  1. People: areas of particular sensitivity include gender, gender relationship, ethnic dress, and hand gestures.
  2. Animals: many cultures revere particular animals for religious reasons, have domesticated them as pets, or simply consider particular animals to be dirty creatures.
  3. Everyday objects: many everyday objects have different shapes in different countries. Two examples are mailboxes and trash cans.
  4. Religious symbols: this category can vary from religious icons to particular numbers to specific animals that have religious significance.

Colors run the risk of being interpreted inappropriately by your target audience. The reasons for this may be cultural, regional, or ethnic. The table in Exhibit 1 is from Nancy Hoft’s International Technical Communication (1995). She states that this table “maps colors to their possible cultural interpretations.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Target Country/Audience and Response/Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Thailand: no meaning, Malaysia: beauty and liberty, Malaysians of Indian and Chinese descent: grief and sadness, Ghana: joy, Iran: negative connotation, Egypt: truth, U.S.A.: equipment that reduces the possibility of injury, first place, excellence, Many European countries: calm, sleep, Hopi Indians: of sacred religious significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>China: joy and wealth, rank and authority, Malaysia: royalty, U.S.A.: caution, possibility of physical danger, Many countries worldwide: femininity, Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand: happiness and generally happy connotations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Many countries: environmentally sound or safe, Thailand: least popular color, Muslims: favorite color of the prophet, Mohammed, U.S.A.: proceeds, capitalism, envy, Republic of Ireland: patriotism, Countries with dense and green jungles: disease, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden: cosmetics, Latin America: death, Europe and the Middle East: royalty, China: barbarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Thailand: purity, Muslims and Hindus: purity and peace, Japan and many Asian countries: death and mourning, Christians: purity, faith, innocence, virginity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pink</td>
<td>Thailand: religion, Northern Ireland: patriotism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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How to Find a Vendor
Try your Procurement Department. It usually has a list of vendors that you will be able to interview and test prior to signing a contract. Another good idea is to ask other proposal shops for references. Perhaps a competitor could be enticed to provide the name of a good vendor. Questions to ask the possible vendor include:

- Who were your contacts?
- How large was your project and how long did it take?
- Were they easy to work with?
- Do they have experience in our industry?
- What is their basic process for translation?
- Do they use native-speaking professional translators?
- Does their process provide for review?
- Do they use independent native-speaking topic experts to review and edit?
- Did they incorporate your changes efficiently?
- How did they maintain configuration control?
- Were their prices competitive and reasonable?
- Did they have hidden charges?
- How did they transfer files and data?
- Was there any problem with the agency being located a distance from your site?
- Did they meet the deadlines?
- What did they do to make your project easier?
- How did they translate text within graphics?
- How did they protect your data?
- Were they responsive?
- Did you always know whom to contact for questions or concerns?

On-site Versus Remote Translation Services

During the Requirements Phase you can choose two scenarios: on-site translation or remote translation at the agency location. By the Development Phase, one of these scenarios must be chosen. Whether you have a simultaneous language delivery requirement or consecutive delivery, flexibility will determine your decision.

Remote, off-site translation is the most common. To use it, your organization should provide the agency with a list of questions and a bill of materials. Define the approximate number of pages and graphics (words, if possible); the desktop publishing software you are using (such as Word or FrameMaker); the original graphics format (e.g., Corel, Adobe Illustrator); glossaries in the source language; list of acronyms and definitions; product information; and the target audience. Your organization should also provide a single contact for status information and routine updates, usually the Project Manager.

Ideally, you will have an in-country contact or agent available to review the initial translation and verify that the work is acceptable. This person should be introduced to the translation agency so that they can develop a good rapport. He or she may routinely answer questions and review ad hoc samples, if not all of the translation, to enforce quality standards. Be sure the in-country agent is aware of your requirements and schedules, because the amount of material to be translated usually depends on the amount of time available.

A simplified version of the translation process at the agency will include:

- Preparing materials.
- Assigning a professional experienced team to the project. A good professional technical translator is one who has excellent writing skills, is native-speaking in the target language, and knows the source language well enough to understand the often sophisticated concepts of the source material.
- Preparing target language glossaries, including terminology and acronyms.
- Translating and editing a chapter or representative text sample, and submitting this text to the client for approval and comment. This is when the translation team can make changes or adapt a general style going forward.
- Translating, in parallel if required, the entire proposal and text in graphics.
- Editing all materials for technical accuracy, grammar and consistency as time permits.
- Publishing according to original, proofreading, and delivery to the client.

If the translation process begins very late and the proposal due date is close, the on-site alternative may be needed. This option may also required if classified government information is included. If translation service on-site at your work location is possible, ask the translation agency to send over a team to begin translating while your team starts to mull through the mass of information.

There are advantages to both remote and on-site translation services. An on-site team builds relationships and it becomes more familiar with your product. However, I recommend the off-site translation when possible, especially for large volumes of text. Translators work best in their own environment, where all their legacy information is readily available to them, including glossaries, research, and colleagues. In addition, they
Development Phase

The Development Phase poses many challenges. Because there are likely to be significant changes, the more complete the base proposal is prior to translation, the better the translation (and cheaper), because changes cost time and money. This brings me back to the TM tools used in today’s translation world. Whenever they can be used, they should be. The TM allows for easy updates, but the source text must be matched and then integrated. It is not an exact science, but it does improve time to market, adds consistency, and provides modest cost savings in many instances. If you are able to submit the proposal in two languages with a time delay between them, you have a real advantage. You gain in quality, consistency, and fewer sleepless nights.

If your translation team works on-site, many of the processes described above will be integrated into your environment. Because the team will be working at your side, you need to have computer systems that can handle the various software in the foreign languages. This will likely mean higher costs, including per diem for contract workers. Once again, I do not recommend the on-site approach unless it is absolutely necessary due to time or security constraints.

Production Phase

At this point you almost have a bilingual proposal ready. It should be published according to the original requirements. Remember, the rest of the world uses A4 size as its standard format, not 8 1/2 x 11. This affects pagination, graphics formats, and binding. If the proposal is to be delivered in hard copy, you will need A4 binders, tabular dividers, and paper. If the paper is to specification, then it should ideally be provided to the translation agency so that the match is exact. If your agency can provide both full color publishing and binding, you are ahead of the game.

Many companies do not realize that printing a foreign language — especially Asian languages, Hebrew, and Arabic — might require an upgrade of your computer system to print the final document. Without such an upgrade, you could inadvertently alter the text so that no one could proofread the final output. Don’t risk it; get your translation agency to publish the final proposal, if required. They can then provide the electronic copy on CDs, print the CD covers, label the CDs, and professionally package the entire volume sets.

Electronic communication is the obvious means of transferring files, and thus a high-speed Internet connection is necessary. Because you are transferring corporate knowledge and your competitive edge across the Internet, be sure that both your and the translation organization’s locations are secure.

During the production phase, e-mail communication will take place on a daily basis. Be aware that there will be many questions that need answering. You have hired an outside agent to recreate your proposal in another language. To meet this goal and satisfy you as a customer, the agent needs to understand your product, business culture, and professional expectations. There is little time to get the corporate training and experience you already have with your product or service.

Help your partner! Think no question too frivolous or worthless. Respond to every question and concern, and you will have a partner you can depend on when you capture the market and need someone of proven value to help you with all of your translation needs.

Europe Versus Asia

Proposals may differ slightly from other translated documents regarding cultural issues, although they typically are so specific that one is obliged to respond exactly in the same format and style as the RFP. Some of the considerations that may apply are covered in the color-sensitive chart (Exhibit 1), but other general cultural issues should be addressed.

The Europeans, Canadians, and Latin Americans are the most similar to the US in their formal business proposals; Asian countries are most different. When writing a proposal to a European organization, you should not get too personal. Our American aggressiveness is frowned upon. Europeans tend to be a bit more formal. The defined style of the RFP should prevail. When presenting the proposal to prospects in the Western world, be sensitive to the fact that while they have a desire to forge good business relationships with American companies, they dislike having our ideas forced upon them. Be patient and polite, but persistent.

In Asia, cultural differences vary widely among countries. The Chinese are more cosmopolitan in their business approach, while the Japanese have a very different and more formal approach.

In Japan, one is expected to look at the long term (and I mean very long term) relationship-building partnership. From the first meeting where business cards, exchanged with two hands, are admired and titles acknowledged, to the closing of the sale, formality is king. The Japanese are collective thinkers, while Americans are sequential thinkers. The Japanese see the entire long-term picture on a single page. The proposal’s Executive Summary with a master chart must correspond to that long-term plan. The Japanese are very pictorial in their conceptual thinking processes, and thus you often see Japanese reading what we refer to as comic style books.

Many software companies have adapted this style. You will find their manuals depicting actions as cute graphic icons rather than as lengthy textual descriptions. Keep this in mind when creating a proposal that is different from the standard proposal format. With each topic, be sure to include a summary of the entire process, and then break it down following the summary.
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Once the proposal is prepared and presented to a prospective Japanese client, you will likely hear a repetitive “yes” as the proposal is presented. Beware that the “yes” only means “yes, we acknowledge what you are presenting,” but not necessarily that there is agreement to all the terms. When the contract is formally signed only the basic terms are agreed upon, and the remainder of the contract is then negotiated.

You must be flexible when making adjustments and committed to the long-term prospect with a lot of patience. The effort is worth it, because the Japanese client is a venerable partner once you have made the initial bilateral commitment to one another. My advice is to have an agent experienced in Japanese culture as your guiding light.

It can be very exciting to see the results when you have successfully created and delivered a major international bilingual proposal. Equipped with the information summarized in this article, you are now ready to go!

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