

Translation

Buying a non-commodity

**How translation standards
can help buyers & sellers**

To the reader

You may already be familiar with the contents of the pamphlet Translation: Getting It Right. If not, please take a few minutes to read or re-read it.

[If you don't have a printed version handy, you can download it free of charge from www.atanet.org]

Getting it Right is packed with useful information for purchasers of translation services, but was never intended to be exhaustive.

This brochure, Buying a Non-Commodity, is the next step for translation buyers and sellers (both individuals and organizations).

What's a commodity?

● White granulated cane sugar is a commodity. For all practical purposes, one package is identical to another of the same weight. When you send someone to the grocery store to pick up a bag of sugar, you typically don't specify the brand, and the person will simply buy the least expensive one.

● Blank CDs have become a commodity. So long as they hold the amount of data you need and have the right format for your computer, you'll probably purchase strictly on price.

But recorded CDs are another matter entirely. Suddenly there are dozens of factors involved—the genre, the artist, the song, and so on. **Q:** Would you buy a country & western CD rather than a jazz recording if you hate country music but the jazz CD was a few cents more expensive? **A:** Not likely.

Likewise, a car is not a commodity unless all you care about is whether it has four wheels and passes safety inspection. Many car buyers look closely at such factors as fuel economy, horsepower, handling, number of passenger seats, and styling.

Translation is not a commodity

This is important, so we'll say it again: **Translation is not a commodity.**

If it were, it would be enough to say: "You need a translation? Go out and ask several translation service providers how much they charge per word and choose the lowest figure." End of story.

But it's not like that. For example, you'll obviously need to specify which language you want your text translated into (e.g. French or German or Japanese).

And just as color and price are not the only factors in buying a car, you'll want to consider other criteria here, too.

For example:

1 The **type** of document being translated.

Is your text a contract, a user manual, instructions for taking medicine, a sales brochure, a set of Web pages or a financial report?

2 The **subject-matter expertise** needed by the person doing the translation.

Someone who knows all about medical technology may not be up on accounting, sustainable development or plasma fusion.

3 The intended **readers**.

Are you targeting teenage

**Music CDs are not a commodity.
Cars usually aren't either.
Nor are translations.**

gamers, genetic researchers, patent agents or simply anyone who might stumble upon your website?

4 The **purpose** of the translation.

Sometimes all you want is to get (or give) the general idea of a document (rough translation); in other cases, a polished text is essential.

5 The **regional variation** of the target language.

Are your readers Mexicans in Monterrey or Spaniards in Seville? Both speak Spanish but it's not the same Spanish.

Taken together, these and other factors make up the *specifications* for your translation.

It is the huge variety of possible specifications for a translation project that makes translation—just like music recordings—a non-commodity.

A single source text has dozens, hundreds, thousands of possible translations. Which one is right for you? Listing your priorities—**drawing up specifications**—will help you get what you need.

A universal truth?

The sheer variety of translation projects is daunting. So daunting, in fact, that even experts sometimes wonder if there is any single piece of advice that applies to all translation projects.

Time, money and image...

Translation is a risky business, as Mead Johnson Nutritionals of Indiana found out a few years back, when misleading Spanish instructions on bilingual labels forced it to recall 4.6 million cans of Nutramigen Baby Formula. Following the flawed directions could have caused illness or even death, said company officials.

Feedback from sharp-eyed linguists has served Swedish housewares company Ikea well. “Svalka” means “refreshing” in Swedish—a fine choice for a line of drinking glasses, thought management. Unfortunately it means “landfill” in Russian. (The company’s Moscow team axed the final “a” for glasses sold locally, retaining an exotic flavor while avoiding an unfortunate association.)

A California manufacturer of medical equipment sold a device in France without a French translation of the instructions for using it, wrongly assuming that all the operators would be fluent in English. In France, French language documentation is required by law. Far worse: patients died from radiation overdoses administered by poorly informed technicians.

(“Always do X.” “Never do Y.”
“Do Z, and you’re home free.”)

How about this:

“In every translation project, the buyer and the translation service provider (translator or translation team) should agree *in advance* on a set of specifications to be followed while carrying out the project.”

This statement is more powerful than it might appear. It provides the basis for a universal definition:

The quality of a translation is *the degree to which it follows the agreed-upon specifications.*

Simple but true.

If you don’t identify what you want up front—or do identify it but those instructions don’t reach the person doing the work, or aren’t understood by him or her—you are unlikely to get a good translation.

Patching up a poor translation costs even more time and money, since it may also mean patching up your image and reputation if you have inadvertently offended (“I didn’t know X meant that in Colombian Spanish!...”) or left readers grappling with an incomprehensible phrase.

Ask any translation service provider, and you’ll get a raft of examples of lost time and budget due to crossed wires.

Examples

- A European lens manufacturer printed the English version of its annual report in full color with a typographical error on the front cover: “Optical Products **Worlwide**”. The company and the translation supplier each thought the other was proofreading. The covers were pulped and reprinted (at considerable cost).
- An urgent one-page text on innovative rail transport was given to a specialized translator with a note specifying that it was for railway engineers. But a reviewer thought it was for a general audience and dumbed the translation down. Most of her “corrections” had to be un-done (with the clock ticking and the meter running).
- In 1917, 10,000 Canadian soldiers were killed or wounded at the Battle of Vimy Ridge in northern France. In April 2007, the prime ministers of Canada and France honored their bravery at a local memorial. But journalists revealed that historical panels nearby were shot through with grammar and spelling errors; they had been translated by well-meaning, non-professional volunteers. (Red faces all around.)

Failed translation projects are as different as frogs and falcons, but they have one thing in common: time, money and frustration could have been saved if both sides had agreed in advance who did what, when and how. If they had drawn up a set of specifications.

Standards to the rescue

By now, you might be thinking:

This *specifications* thing sounds important but it also sounds like a lot of work. How do I know I have a full set of specifications? How can I get through the specifications phase as quickly as possible?

This is where translation standards come in. We will refer to two standards here: the European translation standard (CEN EN 15038) and the American translation standard (ASTM F 2575). Although they were developed independently, they fit together very well—much like building codes and blueprints when you are building a home.

There are three key points in each of these standards:

1 Select your human resources with care (CEN 3.2; ASTM 6)—translators must of course know both the source and target languages, but (and this comes as a surprise to many people) knowing two languages does not

guarantee that someone can translate well between them.

Note, too, that expertise counts: translators are not interchangeable.

2 Come to an agreement on your project specifications before translation begins (CEN 3.4 and 4.4; ASTM 4.3 and 8). The European standard requires that a quality management system be in place, and the American standard provides a quality management system based on a standard list of questions (called “parameters”). Your project-specific answers are your specifications.

3 Follow the specifications at every step of the project.

Don't reinvent the wheel

The European and American standards let you draw on hundreds of hours of input by experts distilling their knowledge of best practices in translation. By underscoring the many factors to consider besides price, they are also a reminder that translation is anything but a commodity.

Q: Who comes up with the specifications for the translation project?

A: Everyone involved: the buyer and the translation provider.

The buyer starts by identifying

the one starting point that everyone intuitively agrees is essential: What is the language of your text (*the source language*) and what language or languages do you want your text translated into (*the target language*)?

The buyer then contacts one or more potential sellers who work in the relevant language(s) about taking on the project.

At this point, many buyers just toss the document to the seller and cross their fingers, hoping that the translation that comes back will meet their needs. Big mistake! This is the magic moment, the time when specifications should be worked out interactively between buyer and seller. If you wait until delivery to discover you were not on the same wave-length, it will cost you time, money and energy to make things right.

But enough about how *important* specifications are. It's time for another list.

Top Ten

The bare-bones specifications from which many others are derived are the audience **1** and purpose **2** of the translation.

Besides these, the most basic specifications are also the best known:

Deadline **3**

Price **4**

Subject area and type of text **5**

Source language and regional variation **6**

Format (word processing file? XML?) **7**

Volume (how many words, characters, etc.) **8**

Target language and regional variation **9**

That makes nine.

For an even ten, we would add identification of the steps **10** to be followed during the production phase, after analyzing the source text. These steps are essentially the same in both the American and European standards.

Here are the most basic ones: *translation, bilingual checking, and monolingual checking.*

An absolutely critical part of this tenth specification is to identify who is responsible for each step of the production phase, and to define the specialized know-how of each person (for example, subject-matter expertise). If any basic step is going to be skipped, that should be noted, and a reason given.

(In the "optical products" example above, if the specifications had indicated who was responsible for proofreading, the reports would not have had to be reprinted.)

Standards make translation a manageable non-commodity.

We're convinced that standards will help you get the translation you need — or, if you are a translation provider, help you deliver what your client wants and needs.

We hope, too, that this brochure has given you an idea of **how to get started**.

As we've seen, translation is not a commodity, which means that using price as your sole criterion in selecting a supplier is a bad idea (maybe even a very bad idea).

Standards will help you get a grip on quality and get all stakeholders — buyers, project managers and individual translators — speaking the same language.

How to get the standards

The European standard

To find out more about the European standard, see: <http://www.cen.eu/cenorm/aboutus/index.asp>

To obtain a copy of the European standard, contact the standards body in one of the 27 European countries that belong to CEN:

<http://www.cen.eu/cenorm/members/members/index.asp> (search for EN 15038)

The American standard

To find out more about the ASTM standard or to obtain a copy of it, see:

<http://www.astm.org> (search for F 2575)

Delving deeper

If you've got this far, you are obviously thinking seriously about trying out a specifications-based approach. So what comes next?

We suggest the following options:

- use the "Top Ten" on page six for your next job
- try out the detailed list of translation parameters found at www.ttt.org/specs
- consult translation performance skill level descriptions such as the US government scale found at www.govtilr.org
- buy the standards (you can implement them yourself or with the help of a consultant) where you will find much that is not in this brochure, such as "selecting a translation service provider" and "buyer-provider relationships"

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