

The Hidden Costs of 'Free' Translation

Why using overseas distributors to translate marketing and product materials can sometimes send the wrong message.

BY JEFFREY JORGENSEN

In the global marketplace, companies need to reach customers in many nations who speak different languages. One solution to this problem has been for foreign distributors—entities that sell client products—to translate U.S. manufacturers' product materials at minimal cost or free of charge.

At first glance, such offers often seem enticing as companies seek to control costs in today's challenging economy. But is this really such a good deal?

As you decide whether or not to use distributors to translate your content, remember they often do not have the expertise and credentials to conduct professional translations. Even if the "translator" is a native speaker of the target language, that person may not be fully versed in such things as the correct grammar of the target language or idiomatic expressions.

The alternative is to use a professional language service provider (LSP) to translate content. With an LSP, you should expect the translator to have experience in the discipline of translation, be highly knowledgeable in the grammar of the target language, and be accredited by the American Translator's Association (ATA).

For example, the following text is found in an English installation guide:

Slide the feeler gauge between the rocker arm and the valve return spring.

A distributor might translate the text into Portuguese:

Deslize o calibre de lâminas entre o braço de balancim e a mola do retorno da válvula.

But when the text is translated back into English, the meaning has changed.

The feeler gauge is placed between the rocker arm and the valve return spring.

Here are some issues to consider:

Time and Resources

When a distributor's staff translates documents, staff is pulled from their normal duties. If the distributor's sales staff does your translation, consider the opportunity costs. In other words, you can lose revenue because salespeople are translating your manuals instead of selling your products. When the distributor's engineers handle your translation, production on their projects could be affected.

The amount of time it takes for a distributor to translate is usually far greater than the typical turnaround time of a qualified LSP. Installation, operations, maintenance or repair manuals—which often contain hundreds of pages—have taken from six months to one year for distributors to complete. Yet, a 300-page manual should take 12 to 14 weeks for an LSP to translate and desktop publish.

Not only is the distributor's time not used effectively, but the time your staff spends on translation projects increases when you use distributors to translate. Your staff may also need to spend time creating glossaries of terms for your distributors and working with your distributors on explaining "American English" terms with which a qualified LSP translator is already familiar. While your distributors may be native English speakers, if they are located in Europe, New Zealand, or Australia, chances are they are not as familiar with American English terms used in your content as a certified translator would be. For example, in the UK, the "hood" of a car is known as a "bonnet." Professional translators are aware

of such distinctions, but distributors often are not.

Product Launch Delays

For most companies, meeting product launch schedules is critical. If distributors are assisting you in other product launch activities while they translate your content, product launches may be delayed, resulting in lost revenue. Further delays in launch may occur if you need to spend time correcting translations that would have been acceptable had a professional translator been used.

Consider, too, that if you use multiple distributors to translate the same content into different languages, the launch of your product in one country may affect your ability to launch on time in another. If your company envisions a synchronized global launch of its product, using a single LSP to translate into all target languages greatly increases the likelihood of meeting global launch objectives.

Use of Translation Memory Tools

Accredited translators and professional LSPs use translation memory (TM) tools to leverage existing translations and help ensure consistency. But investment in TM tools and training typically make their use cost-prohibitive for distributors.

If you use multiple distributors, some English terms may also be translated one way by one distributor and another way by a different distributor because TM tools are not used. To rework such translations can mean sig-

nificant costs to your company.

If you use an LSP to translate your content, you should expect to see both consistent translation of terms and some decrease in your translation costs as your translation memory is reused from one project to the next.

Proofreading Your Material

Distributors do not always proofread their translations. When they do, the person who performs the proofreading may not be qualified to do so. What this means is that you will need to spend time and money on reviewers capable of proofreading the translation. Without an objective review of the distributor's translation by someone fluent in the target language, expect that errors will be overlooked.

Keep in mind, too, that if your distributor translates and does not have an editing, proofing, and approval process in place, you are accepting the liability for any document errors.

Meeting Standards

Your company's marketing materials are the face of the company to customers in non-U.S. markets. The words in those materials speak to the readers about the respect your company has for their culture, nation, and business. Both the quality of the translation and the final layout are factors to consider.

Materials translated by your distributor may not meet international or company standards for quality and may

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not maintain the look they were designed to have. If the distributor does not have professional desktop publishers and tools, your brand image may be diluted if your translated materials do not conform to company standards.

Legal Liability

Your company can also be exposed to significant liability costs for any industrial accidents that can be traced back to the “free” translation of a distributor. By using untrained and uncertified translators, you can also expose your customers to danger.

An example of liability exposure due to inadequate translation is an industrial accident that occurred in which customers of Company C were fatally injured after completing a procedure translated by a distributor. By conducting a test of the procedures, Company C found that incorrect translation of the documents contributed to the accident.

While your distributor will have the best of intentions, their experience in translating complex technical material—especially content that involves risk of personal injury—is likely limited.

Market Share

Mistakes in the distributor’s translation can affect your market share, especially if your competitors are using ATA-certified translators. Consider whether your market share has increased or decreased since your distributor started translating your materials and by what growth percentage of growth versus your domestic market.

One company noticed that its market in Portugal was not growing as fast as its market in Brazil and that the Brazilian distributor handled both markets. A possible cause was that the distributor was using the same materials that they translated into Brazilian Portuguese in Portugal and had insulted customers in Portugal. The consumer in Portugal may have assumed that the U.S. manufacturer shipped the products with those translations and consequently formed an unflattering impression of the manufacturer.

Customer Service Calls

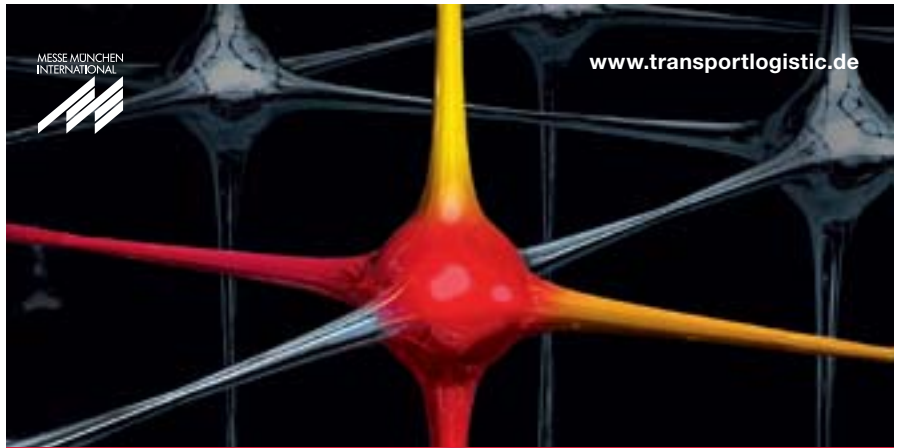
As you decide whether to accept that “free” translation, consider how many support calls might arise from poor translations and what the average call costs your company. It is possible that using distributor translations will increase the number of support calls your company receives. As the number of target languages increases, customer support calls can increase exponentially.

For example, Company A saw an increase in its customer service calls in their non-U.S.

markets. The cost to handle each call exceeded \$35.00, while the company was averaging over 45 calls per day compared to only 25 customer service calls per day in the U.S. for the same product. The total annual cost for the non-U.S. calls was \$409,500. **WT**

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