

How to ace translation shopping when you don't speak the language

 By [Françoise Henderson](#)

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Poor commercial translations can lead to costly mistakes. But, short of awaiting market feedback, how can you judge quality without knowing the target language?

How important is translation quality? In the age of automation and instant gratification, machine translation (MT) must seem right on the money to many, and indeed we see a creeping tolerance for "good enough" translations in the market.

Of course, this approach can be faulted quite easily. Broadly speaking, MT is good enough for personal use, but when it comes to professional translation content, used for example in television voice-overs or text books, nothing but the best will do. And to achieve that, quality assurance and a human appreciation for elements like nuance and context is essential.

Quality conundrum

If quality were an objective quantity that anyone can recognise, that would be the end of the story. But it's not.

Someone who needs translation services has little hope of knowing whether the product they're getting is of immaculate quality (since it is in a different language). And by the time market feedback indicates otherwise, the horse has already bolted.

Five red flags

How, then, can a client be pre-assured of an excellent translation? Here are a few tell-tale signs that your translation may not turn out as great as you'd like it to be.

Red flag 1:

Services that charge for varying grades of quality - few people would buy a translation without quality control when they can use Google Translate free of charge.

This kind of marketing is likely a ruse to make people focus on the base price and compare services accordingly, thus cheating them out of a quality service that charges a more realistic fee.

Red flag 2:

A service that hires people based on their ability to translate into and out of multiple languages - in our experience, people

who are native speakers of the language, translate into produce the best work.

Red flag 3:

Services that undercut the market with bargain basement pricing or lightning-fast turnaround is another red flag. The only way to finish a 10,000-word project in a day or two without throwing a large team of people at it is by running it through Google (which has been known to make pretty elementary mistakes) and doing a cursory clean-up, in which case R5,000 is probably reasonable.

But as noted above, shoddy work can cost you dearly - in reputation or recalled product.

Translation is not a commodity - great translations are consistent in terminology and style and subject to scrupulous quality control processes, including preparation and proofreading.

Automation and computer-aided translation memory (generic and specific - the latter derived from previous jobs for the same client) can help to speed up translation and bring down costs considerably - but not miraculously.

Preparing for a large project, which requires several translators will necessitate the production of a glossary of translations of oft-used phrases, compiled by an individual or a very small team (for consistency reasons), working painstakingly (as each mistake will have a knock-on effect). Naturally, this has time and cost implications.

Red flag 4:

Quotes that take no time at all to prepare. This is a sign that little attention was expended on reviewing the client's requirements and, where possible, source material.

RFQs are generally deadline-driven affairs, and if the expectation is that price can be a translation service's only differentiation, this is likely to continue, with predictable results.

Red flag 5:

Your provider's reputation has holes. In the final analysis, being assured of quality is a matter of reputation. Be prepared to dig a little to see whether your provider is a match. Have they done work in your industry before? What exactly, and how long ago?

Settling for good enough

In truth, much of the undercutting and corner cutting in the industry is as a result of the market's misunderstanding of the nature and processes of professional translation. Being overly focused on price or deadline can lead to being stuck with "good enough" or worse.

Putting faith in preparation and quality control on the other hand will yield a translation that you can trust, one that takes a reasonable amount of time and is priced accordingly.

ABOUT FRANÇOISE HENDERSON

Françoise Henderson, Chief Executive Officer, is a the co-founder of Rubric. She oversees Worldwide Production and is responsible for localisation methodology and human resources. Françoise is an adviser of the non-profit organisation Translators without Borders - US, Inc.

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