

Don't Get Lost in Translation

When one market begins to dry up, try adding the value of expertise. For a couple of linguists hit hard by online outsourcing, going upmarket may be the only solution

Q: My wife and I work as a team providing bilingual copywriting and translation services for the U.S. and Latin America. Most of our clients are PR agencies. We are finding that they are outsourcing their translation work to Latin America, where they can pay 5 cents a word, as opposed to the 12 cents that we charge. Should we shift our focus to clients not yet aware of freelance outsourcing over the Internet? -- E.R., Miami.

A: You face a dilemma that is shared, as you surely know, by myriad companies, not only in the U.S. but across the developed world. The advent of new technologies and marketplace globalization have greatly opened up competition from regions where the low cost of living permits prices that are paltry by U.S. standards. How to cope? Shifting your focus to a sector that is bound to discover Internet outsourcing any day now is a short-term, short-sighted fix. How long will be it before the bean-counters who work for your new clients figure out that they can save substantial amounts by taking their translation contracts to Latin America or Mexico?

ADVICE WORTH PAYING FOR. Rather than look for more ignorant clients, divorce yourself from grunt work and market your services to top-end clientele, advises Chris Durban, a Paris-based translator and journalist. Durban, who writes an advice column, [The Bottom Line](#), for *The Translation Journal*, says she frequently answers questions like yours. "The key in translation services is to segment, segment, segment. The problem with most translators is that they make themselves too small. They have stuck with 12 cents a word for far too long," she says. "The top of the market is 50 cents or 60 cents a word -- and it's empty! There is very little competition at that level."

The key to marketing to a clientele with deeper pockets and a willingness to tap them is divorcing yourself from word-for-word translation. Instead, become involved in creating the text and advising your clients on the writing, Durban says. Old-school translators forbid anything beyond straight translation, but these days, even computers can do that.

"It takes a seasoned, savvy business professional to specialize in a particular industry, offer value-added cultural and marketing advice, and be respected as your clients' equal," says Durban. "My prices are ten times what is charged in the U.S. But what I'm doing is suggesting, reordering arguments, and providing nuance and writing tips. If I were just translating words, there would always be someone out there who could charge one cent less," Durban says.

Positioning your business in this way will require taking more risks, but the gain is infinitely worth it, Durban says: "You can earn a lot of money, and it's also a lot of fun." And even if your clients defect, she argues, they will come back when they see how much value you are adding to the job.

PRESSING THE FLESH. As an entrepreneur, you need to keep a sharp eye on emerging business trends. If you sit back and wait for the phone to ring, or work 10 hours a day at the computer without stepping back to take in the big picture, business will simply pass you by.

"You must read a few daily business papers to identify hot topics, people, and companies," says Durban. "Get out to Chamber of Commerce and business events, and hone your knowledge in specific areas so that once the deals start getting done, and translations become necessary, you are the right person in the right place at the right time." She says she is continually astounded at how reticent translators can be when the time comes to roll up their sleeves and start hunting for business.

For suggestions on identifying high-paying customers and market segments, check out [Durban's column on the topic](#). If you run into senior managers who don't know they need a skilled translator, try downloading the American Translators Assn.'s brochure, [Translation, Getting It Right](#), which provides so compelling arguments why the additional expense is a worthwhile investment.

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