

# Choosing a Translation Agency

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There is no single factor that will determine your best choice of a translation agency. It should not be based on price alone, because as the old saying goes, “you get what you pay for”. Nor should it be based solely on the company’s size, number of employees, or any similar strictly objective measurement factor. Although such information may be important, and should be considered, it is just part of the total picture you need to adequately evaluate an agency.

## First questions to ask

As your company begins to look at the available agencies, these standard questions can help to narrow the field:

- What is the agency’s size, how long has it been in business, who owns it?
- What services does the agency offer, what markets or fields does it handle, what languages does it translate?
- What are the staff’s qualifications?
- What hardware and software does the agency have?
- Who are the agency’s clients?
- Does it belong to any business or professional organizations?
- What is the agency’s project management system?
- What are typical turnaround times?
- What are the rate and pricing structures?
- How are revisions handled?

## In-depth inquiries

Once your company has developed an agency “short list” based on the answers to the standard questions, other considerations can help you make the best final decision:

### *How has the agency performed for its other clients?*

- ◆ Talk to other clients: get references and contact them. It shouldn’t matter what type of client they are, or whether they are in the same industry as your company because the translation activities and quality will be the same. Ask them specific questions about their relationship with the agency:
  - Are they happy with the agency’s service, and are they still using the agency?
  - How long they have used the agency? At least one of the references should have been with the agency for over 2 years. Unless the agency is a newly founded company, be wary if all of its references have only been a client for a year or less.
  - What is the agency’s record for delivering projects on time? Do they consistently honor the turnaround times they provide?
- ◆ Ask for samples of work the agency has done for other clients. If samples are available, this is more useful than having the agency translate a test for you, since you usually don’t know if the person who translates the test will actually work on your projects. Instead, look at final printed examples of what the agency is capable of producing, and expect that level of quality when they work for you. Again, don’t worry about whether it is in your industry or not. The agency should be able to provide good quality translation in any industry that it claims to handle.

### ***How much do they know about the services they offer?***

Call or visit the agency and ask questions that will determine its personnel's knowledge about translation in general. The contact person should be able to answer your questions intelligently or should have someone else talk to you. Notice whether they ask important questions and offer helpful advice, since they are the language experts and should be guiding you through the process. Some examples:

- ◆ If you are inquiring about documents to be printed in other languages, they should ask, "What DTP package was the job done in and can you provide electronic files?" or "What type of Chinese do you require, Traditional or Simplified?" If you are not sure, they should be able to explain the difference to you.
- ◆ They should be able to provide reference material for you about special language and cultural concerns: different versions of the same language and when to use them, meanings of certain symbols and colors in other cultures, etc.
- ◆ They should review the materials you intend to have translated and inform you of anything that needs to be adapted for the target countries, such as changing 800 phone numbers for countries that don't use them or converting measurements to the metric system when appropriate.

### ***Are they on your side and practice good customer relations?***

Try to get a feel for how easy the agency is to work with. Almost any problem can be resolved if you and the agency are "on the same team", working together with no logistical conflicts. Throughout your evaluation process, pay attention to considerations such as:

- Are they pleasant, thoughtful, and considerate on the phone?
- Do they help you when you need it?
- Return your calls within a reasonable amount of time?
- Answer questions and prepare quotations promptly, and then follow up on them?
- Do they request and consider your input, so you feel like part of the team?
- Can they accommodate rush work?
- Do they handle problems efficiently and courteously, regardless of who caused them?

### ***What exactly do they provide in their quotations?***

Get an actual quote and study it carefully. Do not base a decision on the company's stated rates alone.

You should look for the following:

- Are all services itemized and priced?
- Are there conditions?
- Are deadlines and turnaround times clearly stated?
- If you require the job before the normal turnaround time required, do they provide both the normal cost and rush cost with delivery time indicated?
- Is the cost described as an estimate or is it clearly the final cost?
- Do they offer discounts for volume or other reasons?

If you cannot clearly compare one company's quote to another's, ask for a re-quote and be very specific about what you want back. Rather than asking for price per word or even by page, simply describe the entire project and then do your own calculations based on what you get back. Some agencies quote low per-word rates for translation only and then add extra charges for editing and proofreading at the end of the project so that the final cost is much higher. If your company's purchasing structure requires a per-word or per-page quote, then ask what that rate includes and what will be billed separately. You should be able to receive a complete cost breakdown, including translation, editing, proofreading, DTP, project management, and any other services you may need. If you know that your company may be making revisions, ask for some sort of quotation for that part of the assignment. Usually, this is given as an hourly rate.

### *How do they operate?*

- ◆ Find out what their project management philosophy is. Ask questions about quality control, time management, and other company processes. What happens from start to finish when they process a job? Do they keep backup files, and for how long? How many native speakers review the work? What other quality checks are made?
- ◆ Find out how “electronic” they are. Do they work from databases or Rolodex cards? How do they maintain jobs and quotes: if you call about one, is it easy for them to find or are they all searching through file cabinets?
- ◆ Check on employee turnover. Be leery if project manager turnover is high. Ask how long key personnel have been with the agency, and how long their translators have worked for them. This will show how well the agency values the employees and contractors that make it successful.
- ◆ If your company has had a previous unsatisfactory experience with another agency, ask specific questions relating to the things that were unacceptable. Make sure that the new agency handles your previous problem area(s) in a different way that will prevent your problem(s) from reoccurring.

### *How good are their resources?*

- ◆ Are translators in-house or freelance? If they are in-house, make sure that your company’s current and future needs are within the capabilities of the agency’s in-house translators. If an agency uses only in-house personnel, it cannot possibly translate in all subject areas or fields, or all versions of every language, so be very wary of such claims. Only agencies that use free-lance translators can offer a full range of languages and subjects reliably, so look in that direction if your company’s needs are broad in scope. A pool of qualified freelance translators also ensures that the agency can handle larger volumes and/or faster turnarounds. Some agencies use a mix of in-house and freelance translators. In this case, ask about the responsibilities of each type.
- ◆ How do they choose translators, editors, and proofreaders? Do they test them? Do they require American Translators Association certification? Do they use full-time professional translators and/or interpreters? Do they use native-speakers? The best quality results when a translator is writing in his or her own native language, so translations into German, for example, should be done by people who grew up and were educated in Germany.
- ◆ Not all translators are good proofreaders or editors, and vice versa. Ask whether the agency has different people who focus on these two distinct phases of the translation process, and inquire as to which are native speakers. Requesting translator résumés is not usually worthwhile, since most agencies will have many translators available and cannot say in advance who will work on your project.

### *Do they check their work?*

Does the agency adequately review its work? This is a very important consideration, and it is an area where corners are often cut to save money. Even the best translator makes the occasional typo or misunderstands an ambiguous phrase, and the only way to guarantee complete accuracy of the final product is to **edit** the translation.

By definition, editing is the review of a translation **against the original English** to check for spelling and grammar errors, missing text, and translation errors, and to verify style and terminology consistency. A second native-speaker translator should do it, and if the original language text is highly technical or extremely complex, review by a native speaker of the original language may also be necessary to ensure complete accuracy. Some agencies say their translations are edited or proofread, but they might not be using native speakers, or they might just check for spelling or grammatical errors instead of comparing against the original language for content and understanding. The agency should define how it handles this task in writing.

It is also important to know who makes any changes that are needed as part of the editing process: the original translator should do it. To save time, many agencies have the editor put in the changes, which can lower the quality or introduce errors if the editor doesn't understand the translator's reason for doing something, or if the editor's choice of terminology or writing style doesn't match the translator's.

A final step in the quality control process, if the translation is to be printed or published, is a **language proofreading** of the desktop-published translation to check for correct hyphenation, application of bold or italic type to the right phrases, correct placement of callouts and captions, headers and footers, etc. This requires comparison with the original language and knowledge of the new language. A review of the layout by someone who cannot read the language is not enough.

### **Consider the whole package**

Once you have considered and inquired about all of the above concerns that apply to your company's situation, you are ready to choose an agency. As you can see, however, it doesn't always pay to use the lowest bidder.

Many companies get a quote on each translation project and award it to whichever agency is lowest. They don't realize that staying with one high-quality agency pays off over the longer term. Good agencies use many tools to reduce translation costs over time, and they can assign the same translators to your repeat projects, thus improving terminology and style consistency between translations.

If you do shop around in search of the best price, at least be able to supply reference material of previously translated work, so that the new translators can be consistent with what was done before. Just as there is more than one way to say something in English, the same goes for other languages, and your materials need to be consistent with each other if they are interrelated.

### **Confirming your choice**

Once you have chosen an agency, use it for several projects. Monitor the work and make sure you are getting what was promised. Try to build a solid working relationship with the agency and expect the same effort in return. If you don't feel that you have a good partnership after several projects, then perhaps that agency isn't the right one for you. If you feel you need to look elsewhere, review the considerations discussed here and decide where your current agency is lacking. Make sure to address those areas as you search for a new agency, and you should be able to find the right agency "fit" for your company.

Each translation agency operates a little differently, and every client company has its own unique needs. Finding the right agency is worth the effort, because putting your materials into other languages should not be a source of problems and stress. Accept no less than the perfect fit, and remember: it's never too late to switch!

***About the author:** Charlene Nagy has worked in the translation field since 1988. She is currently president of NCS Enterprises, a full-service translation agency that she started in 1992 with offices in Pittsburgh, PA. Charlene has helped many clients streamline their translation process over the years, saving them both time and money.*