

Client Language Review—the good, the bad, & the ugly

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Your company's overseas personnel are important to its success. It's natural to want their input on translated documents. Including them in a review of the translation before it's published gives them a chance to contribute their knowledge. If all goes well with this process, everybody wins. The translator receives valuable input on industry terms, you feel more confidence in the translation, and the in-country representative is satisfied that the translation meets his standards.

On the other hand, sometimes the review does not go so well, and even creates problems. The document may be delayed for months waiting for comments to be returned. The reviewer may change the content, or discredit the entire translation.

Understanding the purpose and structure of the review can help you avoid trouble down the road. Here are some details to consider in advance:

What is the review process designed to accomplish?

This is an opportunity for in-country personnel to review the translation before the project is completed. Make sure your reviewer knows that the review is restricted to technical accuracy and terminology recommendations. The reviewer is not to make content changes, or rewrite the translation in favor of his or her own personal style. Your reviewer also needs to be informed if your translation is intended for use in a broad market. You don't want him to narrow the focus by substituting words that are only appropriate in one specific locale.

Reviewers are susceptible to "red-ink syndrome"—put a pen in their hands and they will start changing things. Circumvent this tendency by clearly defining their responsibilities. The review is not an editorial rewrite; that's been done on the source document.

What if I don't have a reviewer?

A review should be considered as an optional step, not a required part of a translation project. If you trust the translation service you've contracted with, you should not be afraid to publish a document that hasn't been reviewed. A reputable translation supplier will employ only professionals and will include thorough editing and proofreading on every project. If you don't have a qualified reviewer, you should feel comfortable in skipping this step.

When do I need to decide about a review?

Specify that you want to review the translation when you submit the job, so that it can be routed to you at the proper time. Don't wait until the job is done and a final copy is delivered before you decide to have somebody look at it. If you do, making changes may incur substantial expense.

What can go wrong?

The number one problem seems to be that reviewers do not return the review copy within a reasonable period of time. A long delay can sidetrack a translation project. Unfortunately, it's not that unusual for many weeks, even months, to pass before the reviewer's comments are received.

The reviewer's changes may also create problems. He may completely retranslate the document, or make an excessive number of strictly preferential changes. He may add or subtract from the

content, or make errors with technical terms. Worst case, the reviewer can undermine the entire project by insisting that the translation is awful and that nobody outside of the company is qualified to translate the material.

These are all reasons why you need to be very wise with your choice of reviewers. Choose a native of the target language, and somebody that is familiar with your products such as an in-country distributor. A few years of college language classes, or vague familiarity with your products, does not equip a person to be a reviewer. It's also vitally important to make sure the person has the available time and wants to work with you on the review. Attitude can make a critical difference. Is the reviewer really interested in contributing to this process?

Once you've selected a reviewer, try to stay with the same one for future translations. Don't switch horses in mid-stream, or your translation company will have to work with a new set of preferred terms, making your translation memory databases obsolete.

How can I make sure the review is returned quickly?

The translation is on hold until the review copy is returned. Your translator has no control over how long that might take. Set a deadline for returning the translation. Have a plan for what you'll do if the review is not returned by your deadline. One possibility is to go ahead and publish the translation without reviewer approval. You can always make adjustments, if needed, when the document is revised.

Wouldn't it be better to have several people approve the translation?

Remember the purpose of the review—to focus on technical terms, not to reauthor the information. With that goal in mind, one qualified reviewer is the best choice. Two reviewers may make conflicting changes requiring your translator to spend time resolving the conflicts, and costing you money. Three or more reviewers are a committee and can cause a logjam.

Should I be worried if the reviewer marks a lot of changes?

Don't automatically assume that your reviewer's changes are translation errors. More often than not, changes represent a different way of saying the same thing. Some reviewers get carried away being creative, and sometimes reviewers even make mistakes. There's always the possibility that the reviewer does not understand the content of the source text as well as the original translator.

With some planning and forethought, your review can go smoothly and be an important step in the overall translation process. If you don't understand what's involved, discuss it with your translator ahead of time. Be careful in your choice of reviewers, communicate their responsibility in the process, set a firm deadline for return of the review, and make it a "win-win" situation for all involved.