

Going it alone

Ros Schwartz *continues our series for translators with advice on taking your business to the next level*

The main difficulty facing newcomers to the translation profession is how to break into an overcrowded market. A good strategy is to offer a range of services. Although I began work as a freelance literary translator from French, and still translate one or two books a year, I also work for corporate clients and have a small, specialised translation company. By juggling these different activities, I enjoy a mix of literary and commercial translation work and project management that guarantees me a reasonable income.

Even if you have no training or experience in a specific area you may have acquired specialist knowledge that you haven't identified, which could help you to stand out from the competition. Being familiar with the terminology, whatever your manner of learning it, qualifies you to translate texts on a particular subject – and you can charge more for your specialist knowledge. The father of one of my colleagues used to run a haulage company and from childhood she had absorbed the vocabulary of the transport industry, which now serves her in her translation work.

You may have skills you have never associated with a professional activity – such as cookery, playing an instrument or practising a sport, which all have their own jargon – while skills in creative writing could enable you to adapt press releases and marketing materials.

Clients as allies

When it comes to marketing, be sure to seek out direct clients in the areas you want to work in. Identify who the translation buyers are (there may be several people



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within a company), and write to them individually. Write articles on translation issues for trade publications, and join a local business network.

Nothing can beat face-to-face contact. Make a point of meeting your clients, visiting their offices and getting to know them and their business. They really appreciate you taking the trouble to do so, and you will quickly come to be seen as part of the team rather than as a faceless outside supplier.

In some sectors, people frequently change jobs and it is important to establish yourself firmly to ensure that if your contact moves on, you stay. And a happy client is your best

ambassador. As they move up the career ladder, they will take you with them.

I can't over-emphasise the value of networking, both for professional development purposes and as a means of obtaining work. It is also important to network in other professional spheres where you can make contacts that may lead to work.

Top qualities

Work providers value availability, reliability, responsiveness, receptiveness to feedback, a professional manner, conscientiousness and the ability to deal with a crisis above all other qualities, and it is important not only that you sell these qualities on your CV, but that you demonstrate them in practice.

Make sure you're around when the more established translators aren't, ie during holiday periods and weekends. Being willing to work unsociable hours is a way of getting a foot in the door. And if you aren't in the office, leave a voicemail message saying when you'll be back.

Being professional is as much about seeming confident as anything else, and when offered a translation assignment, it is important to sound enthusiastic. This will make the client feel confident about your ability to do the job.

Avoid giving a price over the phone before seeing the text. Ask the client to email it, and give your quotation in writing, clearly identifying the basis on which you charge. You should be aware of the going rate for the language(s) and kind of work you are offering and give your price confidently.

Quotations should be accompanied by terms and conditions, and a contract should be signed for full-length book



translations. Some beginners feel that they should offer a lower rate; that is a bad idea for several reasons. From the client's point of view, you are a professional and they need a professional translation. Charging a low rate sends out the wrong signals (ie that you don't believe you're worth very much) and undermines client confidence in your abilities. And, if you start out by charging a low rate, it will be difficult to raise it significantly and you will remain a 'bottom-feeder'.

Clients often have preferred terminology or a house style but don't necessarily think to inform the translator. Ask for background information, visit their website, do as much research as you can and request that any corrections be sent to you, so you can make a note of them and build up a glossary.

Respond to negative criticism in a professional manner. If a client is not satisfied with your work, find out the specific nature of the complaint – you can't respond to nebulous criticism. And remember: never present a customer with a problem, offer them the solution. If they point out mistakes there is no point going on the defensive. Offer to revise the translation and waive all or part of the fee. If you realise at this stage that you are out of your depth, offer to have the translation revised by a specialist colleague, at your expense.

Sometimes client criticism is unfounded: their objections may stem from their ignorance rather than yours. It is essential to identify what the problem is and to resolve it calmly and professionally. You will build customer loyalty by establishing yourself as a problem-solver. A little flattery can also help. A client picked up a mistake in one of my translations and I had to admit she was right.

I told her she had a brilliant editorial eye and thanked her for spotting the error. She was pleased by the compliment and the mistake was quickly forgotten.

Assess how urgent an 'urgent' job really is and suggest an appropriate strategy. If it is a genuine emergency, consider splitting the work with a colleague and revising each other's translations for consistency (and charging extra to do so). Often the job suddenly becomes less pressing when clients are advised that a rush charge will be

Often an 'urgent' job becomes less pressing when clients are advised that a rush charge will be incurred

incurred! State clearly on your rates sheet that an additional fee is charged for working outside normal office hours.

Entering the business world

As a freelancer, you are effectively running a business and should be prepared to invest both money and time. If you don't have the necessary IT or business skills invest in training. Sometimes, advanced computer skills can give you the edge over more experienced but less computer-literate translators. For instance, in the book industry, publishers of illustrated works often require translators to work directly in QuarkXPress.

Always back up your work – telling a client your computer crashed and you lost everything on your hard disk is highly unprofessional and will not earn you any sympathy. I back up my entire computer every night on an external storage disk. I save current jobs both on my PC and on an external medium, and have a laptop I can switch to in an emergency. It's also a good idea to find a computer whizz who can be called on in an emergency.

Growth and development

Once you've been working in a freelance capacity for some time, you may want to expand your business. I run a translation company, which evolved out of my freelance work. I built it up slowly.

Some of my clients were sending me more work than I could handle, or needed translations requiring language combinations other than my own. They wanted a one-stop shop and saw me as their translation resource. I realised that if I couldn't oblige they would find an agency that could, and I would lose their custom. So I gradually started sub-contracting work and building up a network of trustworthy, competent translators.

I check every translation myself, which is time-consuming, and this is reflected in the fee charged. I work for a small number of regular clients, some of whom I've been involved with for 20 years, and with a small number of translators whose work is of a consistently high standard.

There are a number of benefits: when I take a holiday, one of my colleagues 'babysits' – they are as familiar with my clients' needs and idiosyncrasies as I am. I always have plenty of work and can do as much or as little as I choose. On the other hand, the buck stops with me; things can be hectic and I often work long hours.

I would not advise anybody in the early stages of their career to consider operating as an agency, but I would suggest seeking out one or two colleagues working in the same field to collaborate with. You can pass on surplus work, revise each other's translations and stand in for one another in an emergency or when you're on holiday.

So can you make a living as a freelance translator? I believe the answer is yes – if you are prepared to invest in yourself, conduct yourself professionally, are discerning in your choice of clients, your work is good and you are remunerated accordingly. To borrow l'Oréal's slogan: you can, because you're worth it!