



## Ten Translation Best Practices: How to Turn your Efforts into Strategic Advantage

### Executive Summary

Translation has existed since human beings first encountered one another and exchanged goods. The ability for people to communicate—to display goods and negotiate a fair price—has always been critical to the success and growth of trade. Early forms may have amounted to little more than gestures and grunts. And while languages and trade methods have evolved radically, the basic need for two parties to communicate has not. Translation, however, remains an enigma.

For example, many large global organizations are deriving more than 50% of their total revenue from global markets. And these same companies are spending .5% to 2.5% of their international revenue on translation services. And in some extreme cases, we've seen that number approach 5%. Multinational corporations will spend millions of dollars each year on translation projects—spanning product development, marketing, global Web sites, HR, administration, and legal—but many will spend little time managing that expense.

This lack of attention is the result of three key issues:

**Uncertainty:** the sense of helplessness that comes from trying to operate outside of one's native language often leaves sound business leaders feeling vulnerable, leading to uninformed decisions and over-delegation when it comes to translation projects.

**Process Ignorance:** the lack of understanding about what it really takes to transform your product and messaging into something useful and comprehensible by global consumers and employees prevents the establishment of meaningful performance targets for staff and suppliers.

**Invisible Scope:** the limited visibility into the impact translation has on the business due to dispersed ownership and a lack of systems data means it is often overlooked as a source of growth and a potential target for cost-optimization.

Organizations with large, highly structured procurement programs are often surprised (terrified?) to discover that one of their top 20 expenses [translation] has never been reviewed by a single VP-level manager or anyone from the procurement department.

This paper will help lift the veil of mystery that often shrouds translation and provide you with a context for translation. It will also provide concrete evidence of the impact an effective translation program can have on your business' top and bottom-lines.

## Uncertainty

Think about the last time you bought something. Whether it was on-line, in a retail store, or at the local coffee shop, was the information presented in your language? Did the store signs describe the product? Did the Web site outline the purchase process clearly? Were you able to understand the cashier when he told you the cost of your cup of coffee? In a normal day, the answers to these questions for most people are yes.

Now travel to another country. How did your day go? Were you frustrated by your inability to communicate? Did you purchase fewer items because you were unsure of the features or could not effectively negotiate a price? Did you find yourself looking for familiar brands or logos and in some cases paying an unreasonable premium for them simply because of the comfort factor?

When we cannot communicate effectively, we become anxious and seek out familiar situations to relieve our anxiety. Lacking a solid understanding of the translation process and how it relates to global delivery, business leaders often overlook it.

### BEST PRACTICES

What can you do?

1. You owe it to your organization to overcome this uncertainty and recognize that procuring language services has no more to do with being bi-lingual than sourcing pencils has to do with knowing how to cut down a tree
2. Use this newfound objectivity to evaluate the current management models, ROI objectives, and translation performance tracking currently in use across your organization and compare them to the discipline and control found for similarly-sized line items
3. If you find yourself fortunate enough to have your translation program well in-hand, then

give it the support and strategic access it needs to truly excel

4. If, however, you find your program less coordinated, take ownership, recognize the impact it is having on your business, and make the necessary changes

## Process Ignorance

Translated content is often the first interaction a prospect has with your product. Online or on the packaging, the quality of the translation will often determine whether buyers continue to evaluate your offering.

Consider the following:

If this were the text on the box, which of these DVD players would you take home from your local store?

*“Happy Fun Excitement! Enlarge your home. ImageEnhancement Processor makes colorful loud bang. Family faces have more light.”*

*“Bring the big screen home. Exceptional digital clarity from the new Image Enhancement Processor makes colors pop and eliminates jagged edges from your picture. Only the smiles on your family’s faces are brighter.”*

Number two? You may even pay a substantial premium for it. Why? Because, although the DVD player’s capabilities and warranties haven’t been described, you already assume the first player is inferior. You assume that if the packaging is so bad, what’s inside must be worse. Recognizing this universal tendency, let’s explore how quality translation gets produced and how to avoid being the first box described above.

As a business leader, you know your product is sold in multiple countries. You know those consumers use the product and are satisfied with it. You know your Web site is available in 16 languages to serve those consumers. But very few of you know how this was accomplished. Have you truly considered what it takes to transform your domestically-developed product to an internationally-accepted one?

There are two primary elements: Translation and Localization.

### **Translation**

The most visible change to products or content is the translation of the text, so we will begin there. First, it is important to note that translations are rarely literal. Writers instinctively reflect their home culture in the way they write, and as a result, the words they select convey a specific meaning to a domestic audience; but, a literal translation will often lose the essence of that meaning.

What is needed is a more thoughtful approach—one that is less mechanical and more empathetic. This is the role of a professional translator. These individuals should be located in your target market and possess expertise and knowledge in your industry. As a result, your qualification process for sourcing translators is critical because they are assuming responsibility for accurately conveying your message to consumers.

Unless you plan to review every word your translators supply, you will be placing your trust and the very integrity of your brand in their hands. Most often, this translator recruitment will be handled by your translation agency partner.

### **Localization**

Though the text is often the most critical component of your market coverage, it is rarely displayed as just a

## **Tools of the Trade**

**Translation Software:** Machine Translation (MT) software produces output that is not equivalent to human translation, but it does add a range of options for saving time, reducing costs, and improving service to customers, partners, and employees. In recent years, a number of successes have been reported by enterprises applying MT in commercial operations. See the Lionbridge topic brief, *“Machine Translation: Saving Time, Lowering Costs, and Improving Service,”* for more information on MT and translation software.

**Translation Memory (TM):** A technology that enables your company to compare a new document against previous translations stored in a database, and re-uses those translations to complete the translation of the new document. For example, if you have an operator’s manual for five different product models, you can reuse portions of the text from one to reduce the cost and time to translate the others. This is a powerful tool for cost control.

**Glossary:** A list of key terms pre-defined for translators to ensure the work produced by multiple resources conforms to your company’s particular brand parameters. Think about the terms “laptop” and “notebook computer.” You would want one of these to be used consistently in the manual for your new web camera; so if you enforce that standard on your technical authors, it should be enforced among the translators as well. A good language services provider can create and manage this for you.

string of words. Today, text is almost always wrapped by images and animation, or is embedded in software or Web sites. These elements can have as great an impact on the understanding or usability of your product or message as the text itself. These elements also need to be reviewed and changed as needed.

Consider the images you use: the ethnicity of the people on your homepage, for example, or the sports references in your sales deck? What about the colors you've selected for your new user interface or logo? How are you announcing the date of your big weekend sale? 4-11-07 is either April 11<sup>th</sup> or November 4<sup>th</sup>, depending on your global location.

Issues like formatting and layout must also be considered. Take, for instance, the physical length of words. Compared to English, German tends to be 30% longer while Japanese is 30% shorter, meaning that a layout perfectly sized for the English source content will be constrained when trying to accommodate German. That same content will look unfinished in Japanese, with far too much unused space.

This more comprehensive perspective and transformation process is called Localization. It is used to describe the "turnkey" process of taking a ready-to-release domestic source piece and producing an equally compelling, ready-to-release piece for each target market, combining the translation with suitably-adjusted wrapper elements. Many business leaders will incorrectly state that they want a product or campaign "translated," when, in fact, they are seeking a completely "localized" version.

Executives often assume this is a low-cost effort. After all, there are thousands of lay-people who speak two languages who might be willing to translate for you. This is a dangerous slope. If 50% of your revenue is coming from international markets, do you really want to trust your market presence to untrained, ad-hoc resources? A

good test is to ask yourself what level of skill is required to produce your domestic deliverables, and then apply that same skill requirement to your international markets.

Skilled translators can have as much impact on your content as the original authors. Their ability to convey an equally compelling meaning in other languages is their core value. They can read into your context, and they can apply their knowledge of target markets and linguistic cues to render a language version of your content that accurately portrays your brand and your value proposition. So customers are free to evaluate your offering based on features and price, not erroneous assumptions about quality.

#### BEST PRACTICES

What can you do?

5. Begin to appreciate the effort that goes into your products' or services' success in international markets
6. Keep this in mind when you target international revenue to grow significantly in the next two years but at the same time question why the "person who runs translation is looking for a substantial budget increase?" Expect and include translation budget increases in your revenue plans.

### Invisible Scope

It is often said, "That which is measured gets managed." Most executive reviews are filled with graphs and tables showing the health of various aspects of the business. If the graphs are pointing in the "right" direction, the meeting goes quickly and smoothly. But, what if there are no graphs to highlight a runaway cost center? What if a spend area is so diffused and buried within dozens of functional budgets that no one is truly calculating its total cost? Such is the challenge with translation.

The localization/translation market is estimated to be an \$8B market. That is equal to the bottled water market, the cruise line industry, and the video rental market. Like these markets, the \$8B is sourced in very small increments. The “average” translation project is just a few thousand dollars; but, for a typical global enterprise, those transactions are happening hundreds of times per day, and they quickly add up.

Marketing, product development, HR, sales, legal, and the administrative areas are all likely sourcing translation, but because the individual contracts or invoices are small, they rarely trigger the kind of executive reviews and procurement engagements that occur when the full year’s spend is bid as a single contract. The net effect is that translation often flies “under the radar.”

If we were discussing a small expenditure, then the effort to identify and manage this cost is likely more expensive than the value saved. But, as we noted in the opening, this spend can quickly add up.

### **BEST PRACTICES**

Consider that most companies on the Fortune 500 derive more than half of their revenue and profits from international markets and you start to realize how pervasive translation spending has become. What can you do?

7. Estimate what your company is spending (assume 2% of your international revenue as a conservative baseline)

8. Review your accounts payable records to determine how many “translation” vendors were paid in the past 12 months (don’t be shocked by the number)
9. Form a “translation” steering committee with members from the various functional groups to identify support requirements
10. Establish a centralized sourcing strategy to consolidate the work with one or two global vendors to secure volume discounts, leverage existing translation assets, and obtain service level guarantees

## **Conclusion**

As business leaders, it is imperative to understand the depth of the translation opportunity. Managed correctly, it can enable key growth and competitive advantage. Managed poorly, it is a fragmented, unstructured expense that is hidden from the glare of executive review, and ripe for optimization. You cannot afford to let key expense areas with a material impact on your global growth go unchecked. Even if you are personally not able to run the program, you have the capacity to manage those who can, to be engaged in the planning, to ask informed questions, to conduct quarterly performance reviews, and to ensure maximum value is being generated for the translation spend.

Visit us at [www.lionbridge.com](http://www.lionbridge.com) to learn more about how Lionbridge localization and translation services can bring value to your organization.

## Contact Information

### About Lionbridge

Lionbridge Technologies, Inc. (Nasdaq: LIOX) is a leading provider of translation, localization, and testing services. Lionbridge combines global language resources with proven program management methodologies to serve as an outsource partner throughout a client's product and content lifecycle. Organizations in all industries rely on Lionbridge language and testing services to increase international market share, speed adoption of products and content, and ensure the integrity of their global brands. Based in Waltham, Mass., Lionbridge operates across 26 countries, and provides services under the Lionbridge and VeriTest® brands.

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