

The six biggest mistakes in getting business documents translated (and how not to make them)

Special Report by Dennis Brown, Director, The International Language Company.

I've been involved in the professional translation of business documents for over 20 years. Our company has the experience of several hundred skilled translators working in over 80 languages. If you are considering having documents translated here are six mistakes to avoid.

Mistake One. Using someone who is not a translator.

Some people assume that anyone who speaks a second language is automatically capable of translating well and accurately. In fact, translation requires a rather specialised skill set that is not so easy to find. Translators must have extremely good knowledge of both source and target languages. They must also be skilled writers in the target language, be highly accurate and have excellent attention to detail. They must also have broad general knowledge across a range of fields and excellent reference materials (bilingual & specialist dictionaries, thesaurus, etc).

Many people lack the writing skills, the language knowledge, or the attention to detail (which is vital). Translation takes training and considerable practice. When choosing a translator look for specific translation qualifications (not just a tertiary foreign language degree) and solid experience.

Mistake Two. Using someone translating into his/her second language.

This is a huge no-no! Good translation requires excellent writing skills, and these are first developed in the education system and then honed with experience. It is extremely rare for someone to become a talented and error-free writer if his/her education wasn't conducted in that language.

Ever felt like tearing your hair out trying to decipher gobbledygook 'English' instructions for some imported appliance or product? That translator sure wasn't a native English speaker! That's what can

happen when people translate into their second language.

Mistake three. Using a translator who is out of his/her depth

Translators like everyone else have areas of particular expertise and other areas where their knowledge is limited. Technical, engineering, legal, accounting and medical texts in particular all need to be dealt with by translators experienced in those fields. To produce an accurate and natural sounding translation the translator must command the specialist terminology and writing style of that particular field.

A related problem involves regional language variation. For example, written Chinese varies considerably throughout the Chinese speaking world, and there are even two different writing systems used. You need to ensure the translator won't produce a text that, no matter how thorough he/she may be, is still going to sound a little 'foreign' to the target audience.

Mistake Four. Inadequate checking and editing.

Translating doesn't seem to be a very natural thing for the human brain to do. It's not an easy task to read a sentence in one language and readily and easily express that content naturally and well in another language. That's why good translators view their first attempt as only a draft translation, to be thoroughly checked and then polished to create an accurate and natural sounding translation.

Because of the complex mental processing involved it is not at all uncommon for words and even phrases to be missed in this first translation, or for the source text to be misinterpreted. Thorough checking procedures are therefore vital. Inexperienced translators will hand over their first attempt as a final translation. The result is a stilted translation that may well also contain omissions and/or errors.

That is why professional translation companies like ours will **always** use a second translator who is a native speaker of the source language to provide a safety check of the initial translator's 'final' text.

Mistake Five. Imposing a time frame that is too tight.

People often significantly underestimate the time required to translate a document. As a guideline, allow 1 to 1½ hours translation time per 300 word page, more for technically difficult texts. Then allow time for the second translator check. Translators are also trained to put their final translation aside for at least a couple of hours after completion and then come back and re-read it checking simply for quality of expression. This gap allows the translator to distance him/herself from the source language and tidy up any awkward wording.

The tighter the time pressure the less time there is for checking, which dramatically increases the chances of omission and/or error and is much more likely to produce a somewhat stilted final text.

Mistake Six. Not using a professional translation service

Professional translation companies like ours offer two key benefits. We are able to select the translators most suited to your particular document, and we have thorough and proven checking and editing systems. This all adds up to greater assurance of quality. In fact, not using a professional service means you are effectively gambling on quality, with potentially expensive, and embarrassing, consequences.

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