

Getting There /S the Fun of It!

By Janice Becker

Based on my experience running an independent translation office in the Chicago Loop, the following will describe methods individual translators can use to find and keep direct clients. Developing lasting relationships with direct clients provides rewards beyond the ones you deposit in the bank. Rather than adding more drudgery to your waking hours, I've found that building a translation business has injected stimulation and variety into my professional life. In fact, most of the ways to find end users for your services are the same methods that will enhance your professional skills, raise the profile of our profession in general, and keep work interesting. I hope that sharing my experience will encourage other colleagues to do the same.

Judging from the presentations at our annual conferences, two models of the translation business seem to predominate: that of the translation company that develops client relationships with end users of translation services, and that of the freelancer who supplies translation services to the translation companies. I want to propose a third model, a model I feel qualified to outline based on almost 10 years of living it. That model is the independent provider of translation services to end users.

What do I mean by that? And what difference does it make if we (meaning the translators) provide our services to a company or an end user? I think it does make a difference. I suggest that we think about ourselves as businesspeople, and go about building our translation business so that we earn more, learn more, and more fully understand the needs of the people who require our services.

Let me illustrate what I mean by my own experience. I have an office in

downtown Chicago that I opened in 1993. Last year, less than 10% of my revenues came from work I did for translation companies. I am currently working with only two smaller companies in Germany. My invoicing software that I've been using for about two years has over 110 client entries, ranging from law firms, to banks, futures commission merchants, professors, manufacturing companies large and small, and many others. While my business has experienced its share of ups and downs, I've rarely lacked for revenue-generating activity.

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Of course, I understand that for many translators, working through translation companies is a good solution. You're spared certain hassles of dealing with sometimes finicky or disorganized clients, and you can concentrate on marketing your services to a clearly defined target group you know will need them. Good companies also provide feedback that can be important, as well as an opportunity to work with teams of translators on much larger projects.

At the same time, lack of direct access to the end user (the translation company's client) can mean you lack information that could be vital to producing the best possible translation for that end user's purposes. The first thing we're trained to ask when confronting a new translation project is: for whom is the translation intended? The more you understand about the

answer to that question, the better equipped you are to produce a successful translation. So I think having a direct line to the people who will be using that translation can give you invaluable insight into its end use. (And collecting on your invoices can be problematic, whether you're dealing with a translation company or a direct client.)

Your target market may be law firms, banks, insurance companies, manufacturers of all sorts, software companies, etc. I will argue that the steps we take to find and keep any of these diverse types of clients overlap significantly with steps that will make us better translators who are better able to meet our clients' needs. What follows is based on my experience, and I am not arguing that this is the right way for others, or even feasible for everyone. My point is simply that there are alternatives to the primary model of translation company/freelancer, and here's one. I hope my experience will provide a stimulus to others to discover their own best working arrangement. After all, a good part of our waking life is spent working; we can only hope to make it as productive and enjoyable as possible.

To build a translation *business* requires more tools than a business card and stationery, or even a website. From top to bottom, you're promoting the services you are offering your target market, not yourself as an individual provider. For instance, I haven't used a resume in years. Instead, I've developed brief materials that can be faxed or e-mailed to prospective clients that are tailored to address the needs and concerns of different target markets.

Developing a business also requires its own skill set, distinct from the professional skills of our trade. Fortunately, these basic business ➡

skills are much less complicated than our professional ones, and can generally be had for free or at very low cost at local Small Business Development Centers, a service of the federal government funded by your tax dollars. For instance, in Chicago, we are fortunate to have the Women's Business Development Center that offers courses to anyone interested in starting a business of any type. Here you learn basic skills of market research, investigating licensing requirements in your city and state, bookkeeping and tax issues, etc. And once you "graduate," you have access to individual counseling with experienced businesspeople whenever you feel you could benefit from a trained "outsider's" perspective. All this for the modest sum of about \$200.

Get Out, Get Smart, Get Clients

So, once you've established your business, obtained any licenses you need, and gotten a listing in the telephone book—what next? As translators, we know we need to keep up on developments in our areas of expertise and otherwise sharpen our professional skills. Since we're in essence professional writers, what about a course in business writing? A few years ago, I took a course on business writing offered by the University of Chicago Press, and met a fellow student who is a lawyer with a government agency. As it happened, her agency was looking for a German translator. I contacted the lawyer involved, and that agency subsequently has become a regular client of mine. Of course, I had to mention that I was a German translator specializing in legal matters during a class discussion, but that bit of information came up naturally since we were encouraged to bring real-life problems to class.

Another example of how the steps we take to enhance translating skills

can build our client base: one of my first clients was the CEO of a German-owned FCM (futures commission merchant) that was in the early stages of applying for U.S. licensing. I was open about my lack of familiarity with the unique (and sometimes arcane) vocabulary of the futures industry and asked for her help. She gave me great reference materials and also suggested an introductory course in the futures industry at the Chicago Board of Trade. Not only did that course give me the knowledge I needed to tackle work for this early client, but that bit of information on my resume has been critical to securing at least a half dozen clients since then. So in both these cases, taking steps to improve my professional skills resulted in an expanded client base as well.

So what's another important source of business expertise *and* new clients? Your current clients. They know their industry, and will often know how you can learn more about it. And just the fact that you ask them demonstrates powerfully your commitment to providing them with the best translation services you can.

You can accomplish some of the same ends with more streamlined means as well. After-work lectures, business breakfasts, luncheons, etc., are all popular forums in almost every industry I'm aware of. Some of these may be organized for the express purpose of networking, but most feature some educational element as well—a new development in immigration law, a change in import/export regulations, etc. Your daily newspaper probably publishes a weekly calendar of such events in the business section. Keep your eye out for the ones that pertain to your areas of expertise. Again, attending these events is an excellent way to stay on top of trends (and

lingo!) in your field(s), AND makes your existence known to people who are likely to need translation services at some point.

Getting involved in the international business community in your area can be rewarding in many ways. If there is a chamber of commerce representing one or more of the foreign countries whose language(s) you work in, join it and attend its functions when you can. You're demonstrating your commitment and supporting their efforts to build international business, which is a major stimulus to demand our services. And they're certainly more likely to recall your name when an American business calls up looking for translation services if they know you personally. The same can be said of international cultural institutions in your area. Their programs can be a great way to stay updated on the cultural scene in another country, and in the process you become a familiar figure to others in your area who have also demonstrated their interest by attending.

For the less affable among us, writing short pieces, articles, and even letters to the editor for trade publications and business magazines of all sorts can be a very effective way to get your name and skill set out in front of your potential client base. This requires familiarizing yourself with the available publications, but again, that's not such a bad idea anyway. In the process you may see a piece about industry trends in another country, or the ubiquitous discussion of "globalization" that will provide you with a jumping off point to educate the publication's readers about some aspect of our profession. I have found that editors of specialized publications are eager for contributions, and you will be serving our profession as a whole by educating some of our future clients.

Your professional colleagues are another important source of referrals. My direct clients sometimes need translation services in a language other than mine (German), and I do my best to refer them to qualified colleagues. Some of my best clients have come to me by the same route. But your colleagues have to know who you are and your areas of expertise before they'll recommend you. Getting involved with ATA, either at the local chapter level or in your language division, or both, is an important way to get to know colleagues in your own and other languages. By doing so, you'll be able to provide an additional service of referrals to your clients, and colleagues will be aware of your services for reciprocal referrals.

These ties will be important not only for referrals but to help you meet your clients' needs as well. When a company turns to you to help them establish a foothold in a foreign market, for instance, they don't want you to just pass them off to someone else when they need a particular kind of expertise you don't possess. In my experience, they prefer to work with one provider that will take care of all their translation needs. To be able to do that, I need to know colleagues who translate in the direction I don't, who work in subject areas I don't, etc. This, in turn, gives me an opportunity to work with many other translators, and I never fail to learn a lot from them.

People Your Landscape

This might seem like a lot of effort, so why bother? I hope I've presented some evidence to support my thesis that these efforts will expand your knowledge base as well as your client base. You'll be learning about your areas of expertise, the business exigencies your clients face, and the

specialized language you'll be confronting when you work with them. But I've found other rewards as well.

Working directly with the end users of my translations has been a source of enlightenment and entertainment. Translating can be an isolating occupation, and I relish worthwhile breaks from the keyboard that balance isolation with socializing that serves a purpose. While only a few clients have become friends outside of business, I am certainly on friendly terms with many, many clients, and I have come to value those relationships in their own right. I have learned an enormous amount from these contacts; knowledge of their working world no book (or website) can impart. They've shared their experiences in trying to establish their businesses in the German market, for instance, which has afforded me an inside view that has stood me well in other aspects of my work.

As you understand your clients' needs more fully, you can also market additional skills that will give you opportunities to become more deeply involved in a project and to provide a greater variety of services. For instance, in my field, litigation involving a large volume of German-language materials can represent such an opportunity. I've helped law firms sort through mountains of documents and prepared summaries or full translations of the relevant ones. Then I might be involved in interviews or depositions. All this requires an understanding of the issues involved in the case. I have worked as a kind of adjunct to the legal team and followed the case through to conclusion, sometimes over several years. Personally, I find this a welcome change of pace.

In times of economic uncertainty, I think we're all interested in financial

stability. On the most basic level, I feel that having a client base of over a hundred companies makes my situation much more secure than relying on a dozen agencies. Yes, I might not hear from a particular client for months or even years. But I am always busy with other clients, and, if I've taken steps to keep in touch with past clients, they'll remember me when the need for German translation arises again in the future.

There's no way around it—building your own business is an investment of time or money, whichever is in greater supply at the moment. When you're first starting out, take some time to investigate, attend inexpensive or free business networking events, or write an article on translation for a trade publication. Even if it means turning down a job from an agency, a small investment in your own business future will reap rewards over time. Set regular goals for your marketing activities. For example, make three phone calls a week, attend at least one business function a month, and write one article a year. It will add up. And as you get more established, you should consider advertising in a publication that reaches your target audience, such as the publications of an international chamber of commerce. In fact, you should experiment with a variety of outlets to see which ones bring you the results you want.

That's another benefit of building your own business. As it grows, you will be in a stronger position to choose the clients you want to work with and pass up the ones you don't (for whatever reason). Over time, you will be able to shape the business in directions that interest you and are more lucrative for you.

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written material accompanying the product. Most often, labeling refers to the package insert, PI (*la notice*), but includes all other packaging. All labeling must be approved by the FDA.

Client education note: The FDA requires that “certified” translations be provided of any required documentation that is in a foreign language! It may also require a back translation, especially for languages the agency considers “esoteric.” Japanese, for example, is considered an esoteric language by the FDA.

Marketing and Phase 4 Studies

Numerous marketing materials are prepared in anticipation of FDA approval of a drug, and flood the relevant print, radio, and television waves immediately thereafter. Promotional materials, both for the general public and for specialized physicians, are considered “labeling” by the FDA, and are tightly regulated. They are usually written by specialized advertising companies to comply with these regulations. In my experience (i.e., into English), such documents are not often translated.

More frequently translated, and much more interesting, are journal articles. These tend to be well written, especially those submitted to prestigious, peer-reviewed journals. I love to translate journal articles!

A significant postmarketing activity is pharmacovigilance. Reporting is often voluntary, such as in MedWatch, the “FDA Safety Information and Adverse Event Reporting Program.” Note that although the term “adverse event” is used, these reports are often called ADRs (*EIM*) because reactions can be reasonably attributed to (*imputable à*) the product.

Conclusion

This overview of drug development and approval offers translators a foundation for understanding the pharmaceutical industry. For more information, I have prepared a PowerPoint presentation on this subject, which can be downloaded from ATA’s French Language Division website (www.americantranslators.org/divisions/FLD/fldhome.htm), along with a French and English glossary of acronyms and initialisms.

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Use Your Words

Finally, I’d like to share a few tips about business etiquette that may seem self-evident, but which are often not observed.

“May I?” Always *ask first* if you want to use someone as a reference, if you’re thinking about introducing yourself to one of their business partners, etc. It can be disquieting to learn that someone has acted on information learned through a confidential business relationship. There’s probably nothing that will sour a

relationship faster than even a whiff of violated confidentiality.

“Thank you.” Whenever someone helps you out, at least call to personally thank them, or better yet, send a handwritten note. When a local client of mine recommends my services and I get the job, I always invite the “old” client out to lunch. It’s a great thank you and an opportunity to catch up and cement the relationship.

Remember, it’s called *networking*, not grab-and-run or me-first. Your objective is not just to find more busi-

ness for yourself, but to promote the well-being of your business while promoting the well-being of your clients, colleagues, and friends. When you read an article about a company or issue you know a client is interested in, give them a call or fax it over to them. They’ll appreciate the information and the fact that you thought of them. There are a million other examples you’ll discover as you apply some creative thinking to develop business relationships, and that’s what it’s all about.

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