Translation services becoming key for businesses inside and outside the United States

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Translating words is just the start for a company that wants to enter a new and unfamiliar country. The need to find professional levels of translation became obvious to Emory University graduate Frederick Marx when a job took him to Santiago, Chile. “During my two and a half years working in Chile, I was exposed to the language services industry because I needed to buy those services for my job,” he said. “And when I started seeking out language services I was struck by my inability to find what I would consider a professional partner.”

Although the market for language services is huge, $30 billion according to Marx, it is also extremely fragmented. There are about 4,000 translation companies. Most are small operations with fewer than 10 employees. “The language services industry is the same size as the toilet paper industry,” he said. “I thought that if there was a company that could be really innovative they would have an opportunity to enter the industry and be a consolidator. They could be a company that would attract a market share over time that could ultimately change the industry. That’s what we have set out to do.”

Founded in 2004, KeyLingo LLC is still not the biggest translation company, but it has taken a different approach to providing translation services to law firms and consumer products companies that must translate English language documents into a wide variety of languages.

In his initial research into the industry, Marx found that most of the small players were single linguists rather than professional business managers. “In the translation services industry, once you start working with more sophisticated companies you need to have a business structure and people in the organization that are working in a more strategic manner,” he said. “There must be a client relationship manager or someone who can develop that business and manage the account.”

Keys to accurate translations

➤ Begin with research. The World Bank, U.S. State Department and other organizations provide up-to-date information on countries.
➤ Find consulting companies that specialize in certain regions.
➤ Contact embassies.
➤ Read books and articles on the targeted country.
➤ Seek out native speakers. They know culture as well as language.

Keys to business: Frederick Marx, left, and Stuart Sutherland of KeyLingo LLC have seen their company’s revenue grow as businesses large and small turn to translation services to help reach diverse clients.
STRATEGIES

You attended that last networking function, were social and interacted with others who speak the same language, even though they sound the same.

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1. Initial contact. You meet someone, or ideally are referred through a trust-centric introduction (I actually prefer these, because your status and priority is often elevated due to credibility by association). Dialing for dollars is a losing proposition. Relationships are getting more sophisticated, better protected, and constantly prepared for efficiency and effectiveness. The critical focus here is to add value in every interaction, provoke (that’s right — help them think differently about a particular topic from a contrary perspective). If you want to elevate yourself above the “noise,” you have to be remembered and repeated. To do that, you’ll have to come up with more than just small talk. My top tips here are to be well-read in a variety of topics, listen louder, and capitalize on the value of brevity — get to the point without pontificating! I also love piercing questions, i.e. “How’s your bench, really?” from a CEO.

2. Second interaction. I long believed, and have battle-tested, the idea that if during the initial contact, you made a strong, positive and value-centric impression, you become an object of interest and those who really matter will seek you out. Those who may have an interest or a need for your services often call or email you shortly after that initial contact. Those who found your ideas intriguing, even if they didn’t agree with your point of view entirely, enjoyed the discussions enough to make a mental note to reach back out to you. I prefer these, because the conversation was impactful enough to warrant you a priority and worthy of immediate action on their behalf. The follow up email starts with, “I left our visit excited about the conversation on XYZ topic,” or “Enjoyed discussing ABC situations.” They then offer the discussion enough to make the timelines of their response cycle shed some light as to its priority. For example, if they suggest that you call for coffee “this week,” you’ve got more mindshare than “let’s revisit the conversation later this year!” That’s a rather passive approach on your part — unless you reach out to you to follow up. What if the roles are reversed and you really want to follow through (a process vs. simply following up, which is a transaction with the other person. Here are my recommendations:

• Pre-Initial contact. Do your homework on the client, the topic of discussion, potential assets, industry trends, topical conversation starters and recent events there early!

• During the event/Interaction. Engage proactively, be present in each conversation. Don’t have a value, don’t be a conversation killer, don’t dispense business cards like it’s a coupon dispenser at the grocery store; if you do, make sure it’s mutual and immediately capture one or two notes following the conversation. Be as diligent in disengaging from conversations as you were proactive in initiating them.

• Immediately after. Immediately (that day or night) send a brief follow-up note and include something of value, if possible: a link to a relevant research data, a PDF of an article, two or three bullet points of interest or value to them, or an introduction to an influential relationships and proactively suggest a next step. Be interested but casual — be as busy as they are (even if that’s not true, pace yourself — too much, too fast, turns most people off). Be poignant, practical and pragmatic and always give them options, i.e. “I can meet next Thursday between 2:00 and 3:30 at the location.”

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Find strategy for a strong second impression

All in the translation

Continued from 1B

that understand business,” he said.

“Translators cannot manage company,” he said. KeyLingo provides the structure and a technology platform that allows translators to focus on translation, he said. While the company itself is small — about 50 staffers — it employs hundreds of translators who usually live in the country where the translation services will be used. All work on a project basis reducing the expense of a large work force.

With the growth of the company, KeyLingo has been able to develop a successful franchise model that has attracted entrepreneurs skilled at building a business using this model. The company has branches in 15 states and more than 30 locations across North America.

The business model is distinguished by its industry-specific technology platform.

“There are real consequences with translation being wrong,” said Marx, who compares translation to a difference between providing tax preparation to a single wage earner versus a large company with audited financial statements.

“When you enter a foreign market there is a lot of preparation you must do,” she said. “If you only take the language component it could be very challenging and risky.

Sometimes people who speak the same language use words that have different meanings, even though they sound the same. Take British and American English. The same is true of Arabic.

And sometimes words don’t translate easily from one language to another. When General Motors marketed the Chevrolet Nova auto in South America it simply didn’t sell. Too late the company realized that Nova meant “no go” in Spanish — not a very spectacular launch.


Small projects. The message was targeted to a specific demographic youth, meaning the words and phrasing had to speak to them.

“You needed to capture that in Spanish as well,” Marx said. “That meant understanding all the nuances. There was also the professional back and forth to be able to receive those projects in a rapid pace, manage them, and deliver on time and on budget over the course of about two years.”

Translation services are important not just when communicating with one’s own, but they are equally important here in the United States. Global Trans Services Inc., a Dunwoody-based provider of linguistic services for insurance companies and law firms, works to shepherd non-English speakers through the workers’ compensation system.

“Where there are injured workers on the job we provide interpretation services for them,” said Scott Firestine, vice president of business development.

His company provides translators in 200 different languages.

Marx sees opportunities for growth as more companies take their business to other countries, as well as foreign companies moving into the United States.

“We’re providing systems, tools, processes and training to create an organization that is consistent wherever we are doing business,” said Marx.