

Specializing for Fun and Profit – Edinburgh, November 2006

WHY BOTHER TO SPECIALIZE?

The short answer is “to earn better rates”. This means finding clients who are willing to pay such rates because they perceive added value in the translation. Obviously, the translator has to take the initiative when negotiating projects to ensure favourable rates and conditions. It is difficult to do this if it is the translator who is touting for business, or responding to calls for tender, but when the client seeks out the translator, the margin for negotiation widens. Of course, translators have to be visible before new clients can see them.

The various ways in which the freelance translator can enhance his or her market visibility include factors like price and service but we want to avoid focusing on the former, and will probably find that plenty of other translators are able to compete on service. Quality is important but no freelance, or indeed agency, can hope to deliver top quality in all sectors and all language combinations. This leaves product mix – in our case, the range of language combinations and sectors in which we can offer an excellent product – as the key to market visibility.

Note that it is not necessary, or even possible in most cases, to work only in your specialist area(s) but excellence in one sector will have a positive impact on other business and should enable you to charge higher rates: provided, of course, that the product you and/or your collaborators deliver in those other sectors is also excellent.

Put all this together and you will be selling a service that is identifiable as yours, not a commodity that the client can purchase by the piece from a number of sources. But there are other benefits to specialization. A client who has sought you out and is satisfied with your work is much more likely to pay promptly and give you repeat business, which means lower credit risk. Experience in the sector will bring you increased speed and accuracy, particularly if you leverage your work with translation memory and terminology management technology.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN CASH?

The price differential between the generalist/low visibility and specialist/high visibility approaches can be seen in the following table of current (autumn 2006) rates in Italy:

	per page	per word
general text – agency:	€ 10-20	€ 0.04-0.08
general text – publisher:	€ 5-15	€ 0.02-0.05
specialist text – agency:	€ 28+	€ 0.12+
specialist text – publisher:	€ 28+	€ 0.12+

For more information on rates, see Simon Turner’s Tariffometro (www.turner.it/tariffometro.htm).

WHY DO CLIENTS PAY FOR QUALITY?

For a first project, clients find demonstrable sector competence reassuring as relatively few available translators may be able to show a knowledge of the sector. After successful completion of a first project, the client will be encouraged to come back, particularly if there has been positive feedback from the client's own customers. Since translation costs are generally a modest fraction of total costs for any commercial or publishing project, the rate demanded may be of secondary importance if the translator has proved reliable and capable of delivering good quality.

SKILLS AUDIT

Commercial translation embraces a huge range of languages, sectors and professional skills. This means that the individual translator will have to self-assess the personal mix of skills he or she can offer, match them against the market's demands, and maintain and improve them over time. The thing to remember is that skills are complementary – excellent translation skills may be jeopardized by poor business skills, for example – and no two translators have quite the same mix.

Some of the crucial questions are:

- In what sector(s) do I have special knowledge that cannot be quickly acquired by a good non-specialist translator?
- In what sectors are resources available to me that are not available to the majority of good non-specialist translators?
- Are my target-language writing skills in the sector(s) good enough to provide publication-ready translations?
- Is my specialist sector economically viable?
- Who commissions translations in my specialist sector?
- What proportion of my income is my specialist sector likely to provide?
- Is my specialist sector subject to seasonal variations and what options are available to offset them?
- Do I have the business skills to deal with direct clients?
- How much leverage am I likely to get out of legacy translations (CAT tools)?

SETTING OUT YOUR STALL

- a) One way of enhancing market visibility is to make a resource available to the translation community. Contributions to ProZ.com will help to raise your market profile, particularly if you focus on forums and answering KudoZ questions in your specialist areas.
- b) A second indirect way of promoting yourself is to make an online resource available to the translation community. Mine is an EN<>IT wine glossary (www.watson.it) but other freelancers share their knowledge of computers and programming (Jost Zetsche's newsletter, Translator's Toolkit: www.internationalwriters.com/toolkit/) or markets (Simon Turner's Tariffometro: www.turner.it/tariffometro.htm) and so on. Naturally, if your online resource is directly related to your specialization, so much the better, but it need not be. The important thing is to keep updating it so that users have a reason to come back. Your resource is best configured as a domain of your own, or a feature of your site, because you will want to retain overall control, although active contributions from others should be encouraged.
- c) If you opt for a glossary or similar tool, use it for quality control tool of your own work. Make sure it is flexible enough to be reorganized according to contingent requirements. My approach is to keep master glossary in Excel which can be exported entirely or in part to a Word document for translators working on collaborative projects and into MultiTerm for personal use. The web-based version is in a database on my internet provider's server.
- d) A dedicated specialist discussion group on ProZ.com or Yahoo like VinotoWine (groups.yahoo.com/group/vinotowine: invitation-only) is a useful way of resolving translation cruxes, acquiring glossary material and maintaining contact with colleagues.
- e) Build up a list of reliable colleagues in your own specialization, as well as in other sectors and language pairs. They will help you to deal with work you cannot handle because you are busy, ill or feel like a holiday. They will also be your best proofreaders. It is well worth keeping an eye on ProZ forums and KudoZ for new talent.

CONCLUSION

A track record for translation in one or more specialist sectors may not pay all your bills but it will provide market visibility, and if properly managed will enable you to raise your average rates and overall income.

And to have more fun.

Giles Watson