Faster translation, anyone? Strategies for reducing translation turnaround time

Uwe Muegge
Strategies for reducing translation turnaround time

Faster translation, anyone?

Anyone who has worked long enough on the service provider side of the translation business knows that translation buyers typically only have two types of translation projects: the ones that are urgent and the ones that were due yesterday. As most commercial translation projects are closely linked to the effort of selling a product or service in international markets, the time required for translation can mean lost revenue due to the inability to generate sales in a given market. While many in our industry consider lengthy turnaround times for high-quality human translation a given, there are, in fact, many steps translation buyers can take to expedite the delivery of their most time-sensitive projects.

By Uwe Muegge

Plan for translation

Integrate translation into your marketing plan
It may sound trivial, but planning for translation from the outset of a project – and acting upon that plan – is the single most important factor for reducing turnaround time. Many of the steps discussed below (e.g. developing project-specific glossaries, style guides, document templates, etc.) are typically too complex, time-consuming and expensive to be performed from scratch on an ad-hoc basis for a single, high-priority translation project. However, if maintaining multilingual glossaries and style guides is part of a global communication strategy, updating these resources where necessary for a specific project is generally much more feasible.

Build a strong relationship with your service provider
Today, many (corporate) translation buyers treat translation as a commodity, and, consequently, use a transactional business model where individual translation projects are awarded via reverse auction to the lowest bidder. In an e-auction environment, depending on the size and duration of a project, it may be difficult to align...
strategy

processes, schedules, and resources between the translation buyer and language service provider. If, on the other hand, the buyer and the provider of translation services form a strategic partnership, it is much easier for the service provider to establish and maintain client-specific resources and workflows. In this type of environment, a language service provider typically uses a team of professionals who, based on continuous exposure and, ideally, product training, knows the client’s products and/or services inside out. It goes without saying that completing translation projects with a dedicated outsourced team involves little ‘friction’ (e.g., queries, review and correction cycles), which leads to faster turnaround times than typical for outsourced translations.

**Involve your service providers early in the product cycle**

For many projects, it’s not uncommon for language service providers to learn about a new translation project the day it shows up in their respective mailbox. If that project has a tight deadline, the only option available to most translation service providers is to distribute the work to many linguists simultaneously, which might negatively impact the quality of the deliverables. However, if a translation buyer coordinates his or her efforts with the language service provider early in the project stage, additional options for early delivery become available. For instance, linguists may successively translate text as authors create it or revise translations in sync with changes in the source. In this scenario, even a single translation professional may be able to not only complete a large project on his or her own but deliver the final translation only hours after the authors have finalized the source text.

**Standardize terminology usage**

**Create project-specific glossaries**

Few factors have a more detrimental effect on the timely completion of a translation project than the discussions about correct terminology usage that often occur if there is no comprehensive glossary. The translator uses ‘USB stick’, the editor prefers ‘USB drive’, and the reviewer insists on ‘flash drive’. With a comprehensive, project-specific glossary, these unnecessary, expensive and, above all, time-consuming controversies are a thing of the past. While every translation project (in fact, every communication project) benefits from the availability of a glossary, the advantages are most apparent in translation rush jobs: with an available glossary, translators can focus on translating, thereby maximizing the translators’ productivity instead of spending valuable time on terminology research.

**Have glossaries reviewed by the client**

Having a project-specific, multilingual glossary available in electronic form early in the project is good; having such a glossary with the client’s

**Definitions**

**language service provider (LSP)**

type of business that offers linguistic services such as translation, localization, interpretation

**glossary**
collection of words that have special meaning in a project

**term**
word that has a special meaning in a given subject field

**termbase**
database that contains a collection of words that have special meaning in a given subject field

**terminology**
collection of words that have special meaning in a given subject field

**terminology management**
effort to control the usage of words that have special meaning in a given subject field

**terminology management system**
type of translation software that enables users to efficiently collect, process, and present terminology
Updating multilingual glossaries is a must. Playing an active role in creating and continuously reviewing for fast turnaround, high-quality translations, and review. For clients who have a recurring need, the general rule is (and there are very few exceptions to it) if you are not using translation memory, you are wasting time – and money!

**Provide a translation style guide**

One of the overarching goals in every rush project is to eliminate repetitive work and the risk of corrections – in other words, enable team members to get it right the first time. So how do you make sure a translation meets the client’s expectations? By using the client’s approved translations (via a translation memory system), by using the client’s approved terminology (via a terminology management system), and by following the client’s translation style guide. But wait: most clients don’t have a style guide for each language for which they buy translation services! That is typically not a problem, as, in the absence of a formalized set of rules, reviewers on the client side are usually happy to come up with one of their own. If speed is of essence, however, a language-specific style guide is an effective tool for avoiding post-translation changes concerning capitalization, representation of numbers, and the like. Who should write these style guides? Ideally, the person(s) who typically performs translation review on the client side.

If that is not an option, creating client-specific translation style guides is a service many language service providers offer. And while the creation of a style guide does cost money, it is typically a minor investment that has a considerably higher pay-off, especially in terms of time-savings.

**The bottom line**

Yes, improving the turnaround time for urgent translation projects is possible; in fact, most projects could be delivered much faster if buyers of translation services followed the small set of guidelines outlined above. Some of these recommendations are easier to implement than others, e.g. it is much easier to create document templates optimized for translation than to develop and implement a process for comprehensive terminology management. But if fast translation turnaround is the top priority, all of the measures outlined above are well within the reach even the smallest organization that buys translation services.