



To Be Paid Or Not Be Paid...

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Having been doing business in the international translation market for some 10 years now, I have noticed a few issues to which it might be useful to pay some attention. We translators, be it freelancers or full time enterprises, always have the fear of not being paid. We join all sorts of online forums and/or mailing lists and read the most horrendous stories about scams and non-paying agencies. By all means, I know there are 'sharks' out there, and we would be very wise to research new prospects to the fullest extent.

However, when getting to know some agencies more intimately, another story emerges. Please consider what a Canadian agency wrote to me the other day in a discussion of this issue. Quoted unedited, with other names removed:

You are so right Roald, many times there are misunderstandings – I have had so many incidents with cheques; one translator swore I did not pay her, and ranted and raved for days, until she realized her mother had picked up her mail while she was on vacation and forgot to give it to her. Another in XXXX never received payment, but when I faxed her a copy of the cashed cheque, said it was stolen and that she had never received it. Others say 30 days, and by the 29th day are screeching to get paid.... wow, some days I am just ready to close it all up. It is true that dealing with people is the hardest – I even had a translator rate us on ProZ.com as a '1' because she did not get the job she had quoted for. Jeezz, nasty ones out there Roald; believe me when I say you are a friend. I mean it...

What can we read out of this? Well, for one, you can read that I am on rather friendly terms with this agency owner, and second, you can read that some times the issue looks quite different from the other side of the fence. I ask all translators: Do we always see to it that we are sufficiently organized to act as professional business partners in an international market? I am afraid the answer might be a definite "mmwwwaaa"...

The first thing to have in mind is that trust works both ways. Below are a few lessons I have learnt the 'hard' way. I would not presume that I always stick 100% to these rules myself, but I most certainly try and do my very best to be trustworthy.



- ◆ Always see to it that any and all agreements with regards to price, terms, quality and delivery times, are well adhered to; moreover, that written agreements are issued for all pertaining issues – never assume anything, get it in writing, and if possible, get both parties' signature. Prepare a document with your standard terms, stating both your and your customer's obligations under a standard business deal, send it to the customer, and request a signed copy to be returned to your fax. Do not just accept everything written in the agency's PO, a deal has two equal parties, and their prevailing business practices might be different from those of your country.
- ◆ Do not be afraid to tell the agency if you are having problems with their requested deadline. Giving full notice up front if you would need one or two days more than their request, will in most cases earn you points in their book that you are serious about adhering to deadlines. Some, not all that serious agencies, will push and press until you give in, however, just stand your ground and tell them what time you need. They may tell you that they have to go elsewhere if you do not agree, and in that case, just let them go. **You** are the one in charge of your working hours, not anybody else. It is better to lose 3 or 4 customers over this, than to work day and night, vacations and holidays, and maybe having problems delivering after all. Also always set aside a few hours/days for contingencies – you might have a PC disaster 3 hours before deadline. Been there, done that...
- ◆ NEVER say yes to do a translation in a field/language in which you are not competent or sufficiently experienced – you may do harm beyond your comprehension. Moreover, always ask the agency/client/ customer about terms with which you are not familiar; again, this gives you points for being thorough and responsible.
- ◆ Always be up front with any changes in prices/terms. Do not spring the news on the customer when asked to do a job, but try and keep your info on pricing and terms updated in newsletters to your customers semi-annually, or whenever necessary. And give your customers some weeks to react to it – do not say, "From next Monday, our prices will be up 50%". This is not a good way to build trust.
- ◆ Always give due notice to your customers of planned vacations, maternity/sick leave, or any other reason for you not being able to do business as usual, such as working day and night on a huge job for some 4 months, not being able to take on new assignments for that period.



- ◆ Always be organized, have your contact details updated with clear and to-the-point signatures in your e-mails, be available on e-mail and telephone; at least put up a standard reply for your mail, and/or an answering service for your phone when away. Establish safe mailing routines, that you actually get your mail to your office when it arrives. Try and be on friendly terms with your customers, toss in for free the odd extra proofing or a few extra terms just before the presses are running; do not be a miser, but stand your ground with agreed prices and terms. A deal is a deal.
- ◆ Establish good accounting routines, with a good overview of payable invoices, cross-referenced to any particular deals entered for each invoice. Issue formal payment reminders, with default interest and reminder fees added – provided this has been stated up front in your invoices and standard terms.
- ◆ Do not always assume that the agency is a non-payer if they are some 3 days late with the payment. Contact them, and ask before 'screaming'. Quite often, there are practical reasons for the delay. Do not act paranoid.
- ◆ If push comes to shove and the agency turns out actually to be unwilling to pay, first try and contact them to find out what they claim to be the problem, assess the validity of their claim, and first then take the appropriate action. If the customer more than once claims that "I believe the check was sent Tuesday", it either means they are lying, or that they are not so well organized, which in both cases most probably means they are not going to pay willingly. Get hold of a debt collection agency, preferably in the agency's country, and ask them to collect your money. In this case, you would need proper documentation for your claim, copies of invoices/payment reminders sent, dated e-mails sent, as well as copies of their answers, or transcripts of phone calls to them. Also remember to ask the debt collector what the country's laws say about the validity of your claim; their laws are not necessarily the same as those in your country.

I am sure there is a lot more that might be added here, however, my main point is to act a professional in business deals as well as in translation, never assume anything across borders, and try to be a friendly supplier who makes your agency's busy days a tiny bit easier.

Being a professional in business also means that you know what your work is worth in the market, and set your prices accordingly. Stick with your prices and terms, no matter how much your prospects are 'moaning', and do not be afraid to tell them if their offers are outrageous. This will only earn you a reputation for being a true professional, and not just a 'push-over'.



Take pride in your profession and act accordingly – be organized and well prepared, have your paperwork in working order, and be up front with any demands or requirements.

I assume we would have somewhat fewer payment issues around the world if we all got our act together the best way possible.

Løfallstrand, 19/11/2008

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