GLOBAL QUALITY

No Longer Lost In Translation

by Vernon J. Menard III and Michelle Menard

Like it or not, your organization must succeed in a global environment to survive and thrive. Language differences and communication delays can easily disrupt any company’s plans to make a splash overseas.

Smart companies have learned the best way to thrive is to bridge the communications gap early and expertly, wringing the most market opportunity out of their products and services.

The pursuit of quality, too, depends on the strength of that bridge. Without communication, there is no bridge from quality theory to quality practice. Quality on the ground does not happen just because there is quality in the ivory tower.

There’s a logical, methodical path to get you to the other side.

The Streets of Taipei

Here’s one story about how a businessman found himself lost because of subtle differences in language and communication:

Thomas flew in from Minneapolis to train 17 managers of his company’s Taiwanese operation on Six Sigma. After the seemingly endless flight, he arrived in one piece. He set out from the Gala Hotel to find food. A few blocks away he saw the 7-Eleven logo floating in a sea of colorful backlit signs. He bought two hot dogs and a Coke.

Thomas walked for another 15 minutes before deciding to return to the hotel. He looked around and realized he was lost. Mild panic. Luckily, he’d written down the name and address of the hotel—just in case. He flagged a taxi, got in and showed the piece of paper to the driver. The driver shook his head. The car didn’t move. Thomas assumed the driver didn’t know how to get to the address. He got out and flagged another taxi. The same thing happened. Thomas got out of the taxi. Panic set in again, and this time it wasn’t mild. Two more taxis, same result.

Thomas was lost … alone … at night … in Taipei. After calming down, he finally recognized the way.

In 50 Words Or Less

- Communication is the ladder that brings quality philosophy from the ivory tower and the road that allows quality to travel on the ground.
- Translating partners are necessary to bridge the communication gap.
- Plan ahead and involve the right people in your organization to assist in the translation project.
Find Quality in Your Next Translation Project

There are ways to make the translation process easier, lower final costs and achieve higher quality. Here are some best practices for translation—or any writing projects, for that matter.

1. Choose simple, commonly used fonts that work on PC and Macintosh platforms. Not all fonts exist in all alphabets. By choosing fonts for your English documentation that also exist in the alphabets of the target markets in which you will be doing business, often you can preserve the same aesthetic style across multiple languages. Your translating partner deals with these issues every day, so soliciting its input.

2. Create a glossary of key terms. This will serve as the starting point for a multilingual glossary that can be maintained to ensure accurate and consistent use of terminology across languages, in future revisions of the same documents and in documents with related subject matter.

   For example, the Boeing Co. controls the English terms used for all its components to ensure they are used consistently every time. The translations for these terms also are controlled, thus incorporating consistency and limiting variables from the start of the process. This reduces cycle time, ensures quality and controls costs.

   If a term has special meaning for your company, provide an explanation. If you work with a translating agency, it will add translations to the glossary and update it after every project.

3. Stick to the point. If the communication is clear and concise in English, it is more likely to be clear and concise in the translation. Again, this leads to improved quality, reduced turnaround time and reduced cost.

4. Clarify acronyms. Include all acronyms and abbreviations in the glossary. Write them out, and if they are industry or company specific, provide additional explanation. If there is no equivalent in the target language or market, the translator will need to base the translation on your explanation. Make sure to identify and explain any trademarked or otherwise protected terms.

5. Avoid slang or culture-specific metaphors. A basketball analogy like “slam dunk” won’t work in a country where cricket is the national sport. Keep in mind gender based references are equally dangerous. Your translating partner should know what to avoid.

6. Don’t crowd the page in document drafts. Many languages use more words for the same words in English. Leave more white space on the page to accommodate the expansion of translated text without having to change the basic layout.

7. Use graphics without text. Removing embedded text in graphics and replacing it with translated text increases cost and turnaround time. Placing captions and other text relating to the graphics in editable text boxes allows for greater flexibility and speed.
back to his hotel. Wolfgang, the Taiwanese desk clerk, explained the words “Gala Hotel” comprised the English name of the hotel, but had nothing to do with the hotel’s Chinese name, just as the word “Wolfgang” had nothing to do with his Chinese name.

Another problem, Wolfgang explained, were street addresses written in English are completely unrecognizable to most Taiwanese taxi drivers. Westerners have to get around Taipei with cards that have the address of the point of origin and the destination written in Chinese. Like Thomas, without the appropriate card to show the taxi driver, they’ll go nowhere.

The Training Room

The next morning, Thomas set up the training room. The technology worked, the presentation was projected on the screen, and 17 workbooks were distributed. The managers arrived, looked at Thomas, nodded but did not speak to him.

At 9 a.m. sharp, Mr. Chen, the general manager of the Taiwanese operation, introduced Thomas to the group in Mandarin and then told Thomas in English, “OK, start.” Thomas thanked Mr. Chen for the introduction and explained the training session’s objective, the Six Sigma concepts to be covered and the workbook exercises.

Silence. The managers looked at one another with panicked eyes. Thomas immediately recognized the horror stricken look on their faces. It was the same look he had on his own face the night before when he realized he was lost. Everyone but Mr. Chen was lost. Thomas felt his own panic returning.

Thomas avoided complete disaster. Mr. Chen agreed to interpret, even though he was neither an expert in Six Sigma nor a professional interpreter. They decided to forget the workbooks and concentrate on the PowerPoint slides.

Communication Is Everything

Although Thomas’ story is hypothetical, it was distilled from real-life experiences to prove a point: Quality manifests through communication.

In today’s multicultural society and global economy, there is often a missing link between quality as understood in the language at headquarters and quality as understood in other languages: those of the global suppliers, foreign born employees, international distributors and end-users and customers.

Right now, the window of time before competitors copy products and services is small — and getting smaller due to globalization, ubiquitous communications technology and low cost transportation.

As always, the highest profit opportunities occur when products are unique in the market. Any delay bringing new ideas to market can have extraordinarily large opportunity costs. Although everyone understands the benefits of implementing a rigorous quality program, many companies still need to assess where they are regarding globalization and how language issues impact them.

Companies can follow a path to bridge the communications gap and thrive in today’s multicultural society and global economy.

Then and Now

Imagine a manufacturing company based in St. Paul, MN, in 1981. Its suppliers, employees, distributors and end-users all were located in the United States and spoke American English. The company invested significant time and effort communicating requirements to suppliers and employees and understanding the requirements of distributors and end-users. The company understood quality philosophy applied to everything from R&D to sourcing to marketing. All communication took place in American English.

Fast-forward 25 years. The company’s suppliers are now in Malaysia. Many of the assembly workers in St. Paul speak Spanish, Somali and Himong. Distributors are located in Germany, Spain and France. The rest of the world has reported for duty, but all of the company’s communication is still in American English.
The company is in danger of becoming roadkill on the globalization superhighway. Good communication aligns all the players in all areas of an organization, from suppliers to end-users. Communication is the ladder that brings quality philosophy down from the ivory tower and the road that allows quality to travel on the ground. The winners in today’s multicultural society and globalized economy are those who can recast the communication needs of the previous monolingual economy in a new, globalized, multicultural and multilingual mold.

A Blueprint for Success

What can this hypothetical company in St. Paul do to turn things around? Here are a few suggestions:

1. **Link quality and language.** Involve the quality manager in all of the company’s language issues. Translating is no longer just a marketing issue. It is connected intimately with all aspects of company operations, from R&D to suppliers to in-house operations to distribution to end-users.

2. **Connect internal and external pieces.** List all communication involved in the supply chain, in-house operations and the distribution channel. The following areas of a company typically need translation or translating services in multiple languages:
   - Contracts.
   - Product development.
   - Foreign regulations.
   - Software products/computer based training.
   - Patents and trademarks.
   - Product naming.
   - Policies and procedures.
   - Human resources.
   - Training and coaching.
   - Marketing and advertising.
   - Packaging.
   - Agent/distributor agreements.
   - Distribution logistics.
   - Customer experience.
   - Marketing surveys.
   - End-user relations.

3. **Identify missing links and prioritize them.** In the current or future supply chain, in-house operations and distribution channel, where are people who do not speak, read or write English? Decide which missing links are priorities according to the impact on quality and marketing opportunities. Remember when a missing link has a significant impact on quality, translation costs can have immediate return on investment.

4. **Think ahead.** If a document you are writing will need translation, talk with a translator or translating agency. When you are operating outside your area of expertise, it makes sense to let experts do the heavy lifting. Some people insist on representing themselves in court, but we all know how that usually turns out. It is the same with translation. The easy way to get started with multilingual communication is to let your translating partner guide you through the process.

5. **Select the right partner.** Choose a translator or translating agency that leverages the latest technology tools. Partner with a full-service translating service experienced in supporting companies that have done what you are planning to do. Without that experience it will be difficult for the translator to add value. Don’t subsidize an agency’s learning curve, or worse, suffer the consequences of its inexperience.

The translator or translating agency will use and update translation memories with every project to ensure key terms and segments are translated consistently in every document and future editions of the document. Translation memories help the translating agency preserve the same writing style in future editions or revisions as well. The main software support tools to ask about are SDLX and Trados.

Short of partnering with a full-service translating agency, options are available, particularly for one-time-only translation projects. Quality results are achievable if you involve many people with excellent writing skills and subject matter expertise in both the source and target languages. Assign someone with translation project management experience to ensure the project is carried out correctly. The approach you take should depend
on the skills and knowledge of the people available, how much time they can realistically dedicate to the project and the extent to which the project impacts quality or supports key marketing initiatives.

6. Local for global: It is important to hire translation professionals to localize communications for international use. However, don’t forget

Choice Translating Chooses Pursuit of Quality

Choice Translating Inc. is usually the one to open the eyes—and ears—of others. Not this time.

When members of the linguistic services company attended ASQ’s Annual Quality Congress five years ago in Charlotte, NC, they heard about a host of basic quality concepts loud and clear.

What followed was the linguistics service’s own quality movement, which continues to this day.

Since its visit to that ASQ conference, the Charlotte based agency began supporting more ISO 9001 certified manufacturers by producing multilingual translations of tools and training materials on Six Sigma and other quality approaches. Translating these tools and materials helped ingrain quality concepts in the minds of the Choice Translating teams and company managers.

The teams and management understood the inherent benefits of quality. But could they afford to make a full-fledged commitment to quality? Vernon J. Menard III and Michelle Menard, Choice Translating owners, later admitted they had misconceptions about the cost of ISO 9001 certification. The couple assumed it was simply too expensive for a small company to pursue. After all, only a handful of the 4,000 or so translating companies (mostly smaller firms) in the United States had obtained ISO 9001 certification.

Last year, three Choice Translating team members staged an exhibit at the ASQ World Conference on Quality and Improvement in Seattle. During their stay in the Great Northwest, the team members learned a few lessons about ISO 9001:

1. It is not expensive for small service companies. The cost would be less than $10,000 for a three-year program that includes draft document review, stage one audit, certification audit and two periodic audits in subsequent years.
2. The process of documenting procedures leads to better, more efficient ways of doing things.
3. Operational savings that result from procedural change can more than cover costs.
4. ISO 9001 certification can align your company more closely with clients and prospects already certified.

Choice Translating concluded ISO 9001 certification would be the right path to take. The certification process ensures the company not only has systems that lead to excellent results, but it also ensures team members consistently employ those systems.

The ISO 9001 team at Choice Translating has completed the first phase of the project, and all required procedures and support documents have been drafted. After another round of analysis and editing, the documentation will be delivered to the registrar for review.

During the review phase the Choice Translating ISO 9001 team will make sure the company is operating for three months according to the draft procedures before the stage one audit. If problems are identified during the audit, the team will make adjustments and plan another three-month trial before the certification audit. Choice Translating wants to complete the certification process by the end of first quarter 2007.
most business communication is carefully drafted, thoroughly reviewed and deliberately edited before it is delivered or published. There is no reason to think translation requires a shorter quality assurance process. If anything, given the linguistic and cultural differences involved with international business, translation requires an even more rigorous process. More than one person looks at the original English material; therefore, hiring an individual translator to handle translation projects alone is extremely risky.

7. **Calculate the cost of doing nothing vs. doing it wrong.** Consider quantifying the costs of:
   - A delayed market launch due to a translation error, be it in a supplier contract, marketing literature or a software product’s user interface.
   - On-the-job injuries due to misunderstanding safety procedures or warnings.
   - Employee turnover due to misunderstanding company values, culture, policies or benefits.
   - Avoidable legal problems.
   - Not controlling your intellectual property.
   - Damage to your brand from poorly translated product inserts, instructions, taglines, packaging and marketing material, and poorly trained overseas distributors.

For instance, requirements for overseas suppliers must be clear. Central American or Asian employees performing assembly work in the United States deliver better quality if they understand the procedures; they have fewer injuries if safety procedures are available in their language; they are happier employees if the FIR book or the intranet is written in their language. Distributors and sales representatives perform better if expectations are communicated in their languages; marketing and sales efforts in foreign-language markets (which may also be at home) are more successful if done in the market’s language.

This is all obvious when looking in from outside our own goldfish bowl, not always so obvious when looking out from inside.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY AND RESOURCES**

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**VERNON J. MENARD III** is COO and co-owner of Choice Translating Inc. He holds degrees in international studies and Spanish from the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN.

**MICHELLE MENARD** is founder and president of Choice Translating Inc. She earned degrees in international business and French from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She received the U.S. Small Business Administration’s Young Entrepreneur of the Year award in 2000.

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