

The Value of Hiring a Professional Translator

Benefits of professional translation for your business, including advantages of hiring a real translator and disadvantages of automated translation.

To prove a point about translation, the 19th-century humourist, Mark Twain, once re-translated into English a story of his that had already been translated badly into French. The embarrassingly poor results demonstrated that to have the reader convulsing in laughter, as intended, *The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*—or the duller-sounding *The Frog Jumping of the County of Calaveras*, as it became once translated into French and back again—needed to be read as originally written, and not in a poor translation that “simply mixed it all up.”

Why Good Translation Is Important

Translation is more than simply identifying equivalent words in a dictionary or using an online translator. Rendering a phrase or paragraph one word at a time, without understanding the language is a recipe for a translation disaster.

A hotel sign in Japan reportedly invited guests to “take advantage of the chambermaid.” According to legend, the soft drink slogan “Come alive with the Pepsi generation” became, “Pepsi brings your dead ancestors back from the grave,” in China.

While these examples are at least funny, sometimes the results of mistranslation are simply excruciatingly mangled, such as the Turkish airline notice mentioned by the *New Yorker*: “Bodram Airlines is not able to cary out flight schedule if an unusual thinks take place like bed weather, NOTAM, float, fire, eath queke, war, gone of elefricity, natural disaster etc.” And sometimes, a bad translation can be far more offensive than funny, as in the case of the furniture set sold in Toronto, in 2008, with a foreign-made label bearing the description “n****r brown.”

The consequences of poor amateur translation range from unintentional hilarity to outright offense, and ultimately the loss of the message you’re trying to get across. Why risk the damage to your message, your brand and your reputation?

Disadvantages of Auto-Translation and Dictionaries

Auto-translation tools may seem like a convenient way to translate, but no computer technology has yet come close to duplicating the complexity of human language. Even as simple a word as “board,” has 10 meanings in the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Some of those meanings have up to seven sub-meanings, and only a person intimately familiar with all the nuances of both the source language and the target language knows how exactly how a word is being used. In other words, a well-qualified, experienced professional translator.

Fumbling through a foreign dictionary might also appear a shortcut to translation, but no dictionary can replace the experience of a speaker who knows just how words work in practice. Dictionaries can make generalizations about word-meaning, but only speaking and experiencing a language first-hand gives a person the skills to communicate with precision, clarity and creativity.

Advantages of Professional Translation

A professional translator also brings valuable cultural knowledge to the task of translation. A barely adequate translation job might get the gist of the message across, but it will never capture the right tone—and avoid the perils of offending cultural sensitivities—that an efficient, professionally trained human translator will.

Bad translation gives your business a bad reputation. Clear, professional translation instills confidence in your customers and clients, sending a message that you respect them, that your product or service is for them, and that you care about the basics of good communication.