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helping translators do better business

Special Report for Translators

Customers – Make Life Easy for **Them
and They'll Stay with You**

by Alex Eames

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1. Customers

Make Life Easy for Them and They'll Stay With You

Make it Easy for the Customer to Contact You

During working hours, be available at the daytime phone number you gave the agencies. If you can't, you must buy a cellular phone and/or a pager. If you can't afford one, your competitors can! **Don't let...**



...young children answer the phone.

Even if they do it well, it creates the wrong kind of impression. Try not to have screaming kids in the background when you're talking to customers; **it makes you harder to deal with and puts them off**. It also gives the impression that you'll be constantly disturbed while you're working. Don't misunderstand me, your kids are very important to you. But you must try to prevent them from damaging your business. Bribe them if you have to. You must do whatever it takes to create the right impression with your agency customers.

If you're a part-time freelancer and have another job too, give your customers your work number. Tell your colleagues what you're doing and how important it is to you to get those messages and faxes passed on to you quickly. It is better to be totally honest about the situation with your colleagues and your boss if possible. But don't tell them how much you earn, if you can avoid it, or they might be jealous and obstructive.

If you think your boss or your colleagues would object to your operating in this manner, you're going to have problems unless you can completely hide the situation from them. This may be possible, depending on your circumstances. For example, you might be able to have your agency customers pretend to be a relative. Or you could use a pager (set to vibrate) and/or a cell phone.

If you are aiming to go full-time within a few months (and you will have to, if you want to make \$80,000 per year at it), then it may be that you can put up with your boss and colleagues being a “*pain in the backside*” for a while. It totally depends on your situation.

Make it Easy for the Customer to Buy from You

Be Clear What You Offer

Have a clear idea of what services you offer (translation/interpreting/DTP/ typesetting /email file transfer) - what subjects you can and can't do.

Be aware that although agencies - and they are your primary market - know the difference between translation and interpreting, if you are approached by a direct client they often ask for a “*translator for a meeting,*” not realizing that what they really require is an interpreter. If you don't do interpreting, this can cause them a certain amount of confusion.

Writing a Brochure

A good way of forcing yourself to sit down and work out what you offer is to write your own brochure. It does not really matter whether or not you actually have it printed. The idea is that if you sit down and write something worthy of representing your image, then you will at least think about things like...

- what sort of services/specialist subjects you want to concentrate on
- how much your standard rates will be
- how negotiable are your prices
- your average number of words translated per day

Then when a potential customer calls, you'll have all the information handy and you don't have to sound stupid while you timidly pull a number out of your head. Then the project manager beats you down to a much lower price because you clearly are not wise in the ways of the translation world.

If it's all there...



...on paper by the phone, you'll feel much more confident about your prices. You won't have the classic feeling we've all experienced when you start out..."I don't think what I'm doing is really worth this much money -

how can I possibly charge this much for two hour's work?"

If you think this way, you'll have a real problem sticking to your set prices. If you've done your homework and researched the industry standard rates, then both you and the project manager will know pretty accurately (within 20-30%) how much you are worth. If the agency says it can't afford your rates, then you have the choice of **reducing them...**



...or turning down the work.

If you have a previously thought out policy, on a piece of paper in front of you regarding the amount of flexibility in your prices, then to a large extent this gives you something to cling to during negotiations. You can say...

"I'm sorry, it is my policy to not go below \$xx per thousand words for this type of work. The best price I can offer you is \$yy"

This is one of the hardest things to do when you are first starting out or going through a quiet period. **It can be very tempting to take work at any price.** In my experience, those customers who squeeze you the hardest on price are the ones who...

- cause the most problems because they are only in it for a *quick buck*, so they really don't care very much about you or their customers. This short-term attitude will not do you any good.
- are the most likely source of customer complaints (*and therefore reductions in payment or damage to your confidence/credibility/reputation*) because these agencies accept the sort of awkward/problem work that other agencies will not touch.

- are the most difficult to deal with because they cannot be bothered to issue proper written instructions...

*“I’ve got lots of balls in the air”
“I’m too busy”*

- are most likely to pay you late or not at all.

Also, once you are involved with a customer, it is very hard to increase your rates to this customer. I did manage this recently as follows...

A new agency called with a job and quoted my “old” prices to me. They had held my details on file for 18 months before they had any work for me. My charges had increased slightly during this period.

Because they had already quoted for the job to their customer, I agreed to do it for the old price but made it clear that this was a one-time special and future work would be at the new rate. They accepted this and I’ve subsequently done quite a lot of work for them at the higher rate.

Setting Your Rates

Counting Systems



In the US and the UK, the most often quoted method of charging for translations is per word or per thousand words. There are other systems too. Some countries have a “**standard page**” which can be 1800 or 1600 keystrokes depending on which country it is.

And to complicate things further, in some countries like Germany the convention is to charge per “**line**” where a line is 55 or 60 characters.

The good news is that it will usually be relatively constant for your language combination. There are tools to help you easily see the difference and set your rates according to anyone’s pricing standard. As a bonus, with the full version of...

[How To Earn \\$80.000+ per Year as a Freelance Translator](#)

<http://www.translatortips.com/ht50.html>

...eBook you get a *translatortips*[®] custom word counting tool which can be used to count the words in a whole range of file types and multiple files and directories simultaneously.

Source or Target

This debate is as old as the hills. Do I charge for the number of words in the original source language or the target language?

This completely depends on what you can arrange with the client. Many clients prefer source language because it means they can give a **fixed price quotation** to their client in advance. This is obviously good for them for getting the business. Even more so if the project is into several languages. They won't have to count each language separately.

If you charge on target language word count, the client must trust you not to pad the text with extra words for the sake of pumping up your fee (it's not unheard of).

It's a good idea to study the word count of a few large translation jobs to see which language has more words in your combination. You can do this using the...

File > Properties > Statistics

...feature in Word. I recommend you have two different rates. **One for source and one for target counting**, so you can quote the appropriate figure depending on what the client wants. Then there will be no nasty surprises.

Your actual rates will depend on geography, language, timing, type of text and bulk discounts.

Geography

If you're working in a different country from that of the client, don't automatically expect to set your rates as high as you would if you were in his or her country. Working abroad carries a *risk premium* since the agency feels less in control and **less able to come and...**



...**kick your backside** if things go wrong. This risk and the associated stress must be reflected in higher profits for the agency. This means you get a smaller piece of the cake - but that is life. It all depends where you and the client are based. Of course, the **risk is increased for you, too**, but the clients don't really see it that way. 🤔

Language

Some languages are more valuable than others. This is mainly due to the number of people competing for the same work, which drives the price down - good old-fashioned **market forces!**

In the December 1998 ITI (Institute of Translation and Interpreting UK) rates survey, average freelance rates per 1000 words (*language-English*) for translation companies were...

French	\$88
German	\$92
Japanese	\$108
Polish	\$114

So, targeting the UK market, if you do French or German you're going to find it more competitive than if you do Polish or Japanese. Rates have not changed significantly in the last couple of years. Increased competition due to the relative ease of sub-contracting abroad has held them at more or less steady levels.

You can order a full copy of the December 1998 ITI rates and salaries survey from the ITI at...

<http://www.iti.org.uk>

There's a slightly newer one (1999) from the Institute of Linguists...

<http://www.iol.org.uk>

Unbelievably enough, it can only be ordered by mail, but there you go. 🤔

You can also query an ongoing survey by various fields (**Ex.** language and client country) at...

Language Combination	<input type="text"/>
Subject	<input type="text"/>
Translator's country	<input type="text"/>
Agency's Country	<input type="text" value="US"/>
Client's country	<input type="text"/>
<input type="button" value="Submit Query"/> <input type="button" value="Reset"/>	

<http://www.macroconsulting.com/rates.asp>

But be aware that all of these are **only a guideline**. This may not be what customers are prepared to pay you. Alternatively, you could pretend to be a customer and fax a 'job' to a bunch of agencies for a quotation, then deduct 30-50% to set your own rates.

This might be a good idea, since the ATA (American Translators Association) has to be cautious about **how rates information is provided...**



...for fear of antitrust action.

Timing

You may wish to charge a higher rate for urgent work than for something which you can easily fit in around your other obligations. Some agencies will accept this, and others have no structure in place to deal with it. Others try to discourage clients from rushing things through by not taking on really urgent work.

Type of Text

You may wish to charge less for ordinary text, e.g. personal letters, than for technical or legal texts.

A lot of people just charge a “*one price fits all*” rate, but then may not do very well out of a very difficult job which takes a long time to complete.

Bulk Discounts

You may wish to give a discount for texts over, say, 10,000 words. This could attract high-volume work, but it is also pure erosion of your profits, so be careful how much you give away! Discount is a **dirty word in business!**

Be Responsive

If you are **asked for a...**



...faxed quote/estimate, then do it quickly.

Preferably **do it immediately, but definitely within one hour.** Windows of opportunity disappear very quickly in the translation industry! This is why you have to be easy to contact at all times.

More On Rates

Cristina Mendia, one of our *translatortips*[®] *forums* moderators, answered a rates question as follows...

"This issue of how much to charge is one of the hardest when you first start out, as there are no guidelines at all.

I can only share my experience: I made a conscious decision to be on the higher end of the market when I first started. As someone said earlier, if you under price yourself, clients will think you are no good and other translators won't like you much.

I only translate into Portuguese, I live in London, and I charge £75/1000 words (which normally is about 12 or 13 cents a word, I think) to agencies. At least in London, I know only of one person charging more than this. I have found it is as much as the market can bear.

Direct clients I charge £100 per thousand words (normally 16 cents a word, but now the dollar is so high I don't know the exchange rate).

It is a very hard decision but one that will determine your future. You can't be so expensive that nobody will employ you nor so cheap people will doubt the quality of your work...and whatever you state as your prices, it will be hard to raise them for existing clients...

What I think new translators (and even not so new) need to decide is how much DTP and formatting work they are willing to do before they charge extra for it. I charge programs such as PowerPoint and Quark by the hour.

At the beginning, it can be very tempting to go very cheap or accept lower rates just to get the job, but my opinion is that is bad business practice.

Of course, rates vary from country to country, but if you ask a few people doing the same languages as you, you will get an idea of the market wherever you live or wherever your clients are. Only you know how confident you feel about the quality of your work, computer knowledge and so on."

Gianna Mendli,

There were many other good answers to this rates question. Membership of the *translatortips*[®] forums is a bonus bundled with...

[How To Earn \\$80,000+ per Year as a Freelance Translator](http://www.translatortips.com/ht50.html)
<http://www.translatortips.com/ht50.html>

Make it Easy for the Customer to Choose You Again

Your...



...goal...

...is to make life so easy for your customer that he absolutely falls all over himself to choose you again, and happily pays your rates because he has absolute peace of mind.

One of the fundamental principles of good long-lasting businesses (and you'd better get used to the idea that you are running your own business) is that of repeat business. Once you get a new customer, you need to do everything in your power to keep this customer. **It is far more expensive to get a new customer than to keep an existing one.** Here's an example to illustrate my point...

If you do a postal mailing to 100 agencies, you may not realize this but it has probably cost you at least 60-70 cents per agency - that's \$70. The scary thing is that in the direct mail industry, the average response rate is less than 2%. This means for every 100 letters you send out, you may expect to get 2 customers unless you have something very special to offer. So that's cost you \$35 per customer. This may sound awful, but **you'll earn this much and make a profit on your first job with each customer**, so this cost is put in its proper context.

The point about getting the repeat business is that if you do another job for the same customer, you don't have this \$35 up-front expense. So surely it is worth your while to build up a portfolio of regular clients! If you do 30 jobs for one customer (say *at an average \$80 per job*) over a 12-month period, your actual costs of obtaining the customer are still the original \$35 up-front and, ignoring other costs which are small, you will have made...

\$2400 - \$35 = \$2365 profit from this one customer

But if you are rude or difficult to deal with and they decide not to choose you again (for whatever reason - you'll never find out why because they will not complain - you will just never hear from them again), you will not gain from these "back-end" repeat sales which are effectively pure profit.

Looking at it another way, if you don't get the repeat business, obtaining 30 new customers will cost you...

30 * \$35 = \$1050

So if you get thirty \$80 jobs all from new customers, you will only make...

\$2400 - \$1050 = \$1350 profit from these 30 customers

It doesn't take a genius to work out which way is better. AND if you can keep all thirty customers, **your earnings will...**



...skyrocket.

It is absolutely amazing how many large businesses have forgotten this basic customer-service principle. **Keep them happy, and keep them!**

Give the customer every reason to use your services again, and no reason to call someone else instead.

1) Give them a little more than they expect - a little more than the competition

If your client doesn't know the target language, which is usually the case, the only way (s)he can judge the job is by its presentation - how it looks. Do that table or

extra formatting or justify the text so that it looks nice. Don't be stingy, make your product look good and they'll keep coming back - and pay a premium rate.

You're making their life easier because they don't have to spend time formatting a document that they cannot understand! They will really appreciate this. Really **get to know your word processing package**, then it won't take you long to give this extra service.

Also, if a document looks good, it is harder to criticize the content because the **initial impression is...**



...favorable.

2) Document Appearance

In my opinion, a translated document should look almost exactly the same as or even slightly better than the original with respect to layout/formatting. There is an older school of thought that says...

“I'm a translator - it's not my job to do desktop publishing (DTP)”

To these people I would say...

“Well, who do you expect is going to do it, since you are the language specialist? Other people don't know what goes where in another language”

I suggest that you do all formatting and charge extra for heavily formatted documents. Make it clear in advance that you intend to do this. **Be a one-stop document translation/DTP shop.**

Spread the document out nicely on the page. Never send out a document in less than 12-point font size, unless you need to fit a certain amount of text within one table or page. Not everyone can easily read a 10-point font. You don't want to lose a customer, that cost you \$35, just because of the **cost of a piece of paper!**

Never use multiple spaces or multiple tabs when you should be using indents. If someone wants to change the font after you've finished, they will have to reformat

the whole section to cut out the extra spaces and tabs. Some agencies will charge you for this loss of time.

Allow plenty of white space on the page. Try to have margins of 1 inch (2.54 cm) at top, bottom, left and right. Eastern Europeans are particularly guilty of trying to squeeze too much onto a page to save paper. Don't be stingy!

If the document looks like an amateur production, you're going to have much more trouble with criticism than if it looks good. If your document looks professionally produced and contains a few questionable bits, you are **much more likely to get away with it**. It's psychologically quite **hard to criticize something that looks really good!**

However you must do **everything** within your power and ability to insure that the document you send out represents the best standard of your work. If the work is not well done, you will not get away with it, however pretty it may be.

Virtually everyone now has access to word processors and a lot of people use them every day, so the generally expected layout standards are high. Make sure yours is in the top 10%. If you don't know how to lay things out nicely, then you can always buy a book or take a course. But if you follow the pointers above, you will not go far wrong.

3) Plan to deliver the job a little ahead of schedule

This is a great way to earn repeat business. Most translation agencies are under quite a lot of pressure to deliver to their clients within tight deadlines. If you always give them plenty of time to process the job, **it reduces...**



...their stress level.

They will actually choose you in future because of your reliability. Anything you can do that will increase the customer's faith in you or reduce their stress or workload will make it easier for them to choose you again next time.

4) Good communication **EVERY** time

Every time you speak to a client is a potential sales pitch for your next assignment. Make time for your customers. Talk to them, try to get to know them and build up a

good relationship with them. Try to understand and like them. It's easy to give work to someone you get on well with.

If you make it a pleasurable event when they call you, then it will be psychologically harder for them to call a competitor even if they are slightly cheaper or quicker. Become their friend in a genuine way - it can only do you good. Work towards a totally open partnership with your clients.

5) Do favors for your customers - then they'll "owe" you some work!

You may be busy on a 35,000 word project that will pay the bills for the next 3 months and leave you some money to set aside for that new computer/car/house that you want.

But to Joe Bloggs, his \$40 urgent job is very important. If you fit it in for him now, letting him know in a nice way that it's not very convenient...

"but since you're a good/new customer we'll fit you in"

...how do you know he won't call *you* next time with a 35,000 word job?

Your customers may phone you from time to time with a "*just a few words*" job. Don't automatically sting them for a full minimum charge. Give them a discount, or do it for nothing. They'll almost always come back.

Answer the Phone Within 3 Rings and With a Smile

Answering the phone promptly makes you appear professional. If the phone is within your reach do let it ring twice, or the person at the other end will be surprised if you answer immediately.

Be pleasant, helpful and personal. People **enjoy interacting with...**



...**happy people**, not grumpy miserable ones.

☺ "Hello, ALMAL, Alex speaking" ☺

If you think you don't know how to answer the phone nicely, listen to one of the direct banking/insurance companies' styles. The important thing is to be friendly and cheerful. Encourage the customer to talk to you and be helpful. Make it easy; even make it fun!

Apollo, one of our *translatortips*[®] forums moderators wrote the following article for *tranfree* 23...

Top 8 Telephone Tips

By Apollo (one of our forum moderators)

I've often heard it said that the telephone is the most important piece of equipment a translator can have. To an extent that's true. But occasionally it's not used to its best advantage. So here I'd like to take a look at some common errors and how to avoid them...

1) Sounding Stressed

I know when you're busy and the phone doesn't stop, it's hard not to sound stressed! But a good way around this is to smile as you answer the phone. Try it! It changes "stressed" to "smiley", and gives a much more positive impression of you. It's much nicer to deal with pleasant people, and they're the ones we go back to time and time again.

2) Not Returning Calls

Yes, a project manager may try 30 people before placing a translation. Yours may be one of 29 messages left on answering machines. But it creates a really good impression if you do call back, if only to say "sorry, I'm busy"! It tells us you're conscientious and care about your clients.

3) (Not) Using Call Waiting

Call Waiting in itself is fine. Except most people ignore it and carry on their original conversation! Very frustrating. Why buy it if you don't use it?

All you have to do is switch calls, say "hi, I'll call you back in a minute", and that's it! Much better than ignoring the call and hoping whoever it was will call back. They won't!

4) Allowing Children to Answer the Phone

Don't get me wrong, I have nothing against children! But if a small child answers the call, we have to ask ourselves whether this is someone who takes their work seriously. Sometimes it's unavoidable, but as Alex mentions in his book, it's much better

to bribe them to leave it alone... :)

5) Taking the phone off the hook if you're very busy

This is my pet hate! If your line is genuinely engaged then that's sometimes frustrating. But if someone has just taken themselves out of action, that's very annoying. Much better to have an ansaphone message saying you're very busy and can't come to the phone. At least then we can leave a message!

6) Being rude!

If you're busy, you may not be pleased when someone calls you with a job, especially if you don't know them. But you'd be amazed at how many people respond to such calls with a marked lack of politeness!

"I'm very busy, I haven't got time
for companies I don't know"

...is one such example. Not usually put that nicely, in fact! It doesn't take long to say you're sorry, you're very busy and can't help, but do call again and we can discuss working together. Same message, **very different results.**

7) Don't Assume You're The Only Person They Called

You would be amazed at how many people are left ansaphone messages regarding new jobs to be done. They then get annoyed when the project manager has already placed the job with someone else! Messages are left "just in case", but we do keep calling round. It's unavoidable. We have clients wanting everything NOW, so we have no choice. Please don't take it out on us!

8) Assuming people know what you're talking about

Most translators are guilty of this. :)
You're working on a job for a client. Because it's at the forefront of your mind, you assume it's at the forefront of your client's mind too. 99 times out of 100, it isn't. I may have 15 or 20 jobs in progress at any one time.

If you then call me and say...

"what does this sentence on page 4 mean"

...I won't know what you're talking about. It's very helpful if you can say...

"I'm doing a job XYZ for you, can you spare
a minute to help me out with something?"

...it makes you sound organized and caring!

You'll see in the above that I mention good impressions a lot. This is because good impressions count. As a project manager, I don't know anything about you except the languages and subjects you offer.

So first impressions of you are important. As Alex says in his book, make your clients genuinely like you as a person. It works!

Apollo

----- Alex's Comment-----

It certainly does work. Become their friend in a genuine way and it's impossible for the client to not want to call you :)

It does take time talking to people to get to this level, so you have to be sensitive if they might be busy.

So another tip would be...

Don't go on and on and on unless you've already checked they aren't stressed out with 3 zillion jobs to do today. Just show them that you care about them and they'll care about you.

Membership of the *translatortips*[®] forums is a bonus bundled with...

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Never Disappoint a Customer

Deadlines

If you commit to a deadline, make sure that you meet it - **no excuses!** If you're not going to meet it, then let the customer know in good time for them to do something about it, not half an hour before the deadline. They will not be fooled if you send a lot of queries just before the deadline. This is not well received.

Quality

It is vital to understand the required quality level for each job. Try to find out what your translation will be used for and charge at the appropriate level. Common uses for translation are...

- Information only
- Publication and distribution

- Legal/patent purposes

But if you are told something is for information only, this doesn't mean you don't have to do a good job. Imagine a company director wants to do business abroad. (S)he may make critical business decisions based on information translated by you. If you make a bad mistake, **you may find yourself...**



...being sued.

I hope that you enjoyed reading this report and that it will help you in building up your freelance translation business.

Alex Eames

If you found this report useful you may wish to know that it is extracted from my recently published ebook...

[How to Earn \\$80,000+ Per Year As A Freelance Translator](#)

The second edition (April 2001) includes...

- *tranmail basic* - a list of 220 email addresses of translation agencies around the world
- 12 months FREE membership of *translatortips*[®] forums
- 75 page eBook – Condensed tranfree articles volume 1. Best of volume 1 of the most popular publication on the planet for translators
- 500+ page eBook – AutoResponder Magic. How to automate your follow-up process
- Detailed job survey results. Find out the best sites to get registered at.
- Never have to count words again. Word counting utility that counts whole groups of files extremely quickly

You can find out the full package details at...

<http://www.translatortips.com/ht50.html>

Here's what a few people have said about the first edition of [How to Earn £50,000+ Per Year as a Freelance Translator...](#)

"Are you so flooded with translation work that you never have a dry spell? Are you already the #1 choice for hundreds of clients fighting daily for your services? Then you don't need this book! The rest of us, both novices and veterans, will all find useful advice about how to build up our translation businesses in the cyberage. With good humor and plain English, Alex shows us the perspective from both the translator's side and the agency side. And knowledge in this case is definitely power: If you know what clients want, you have a better chance of convincing them you can provide it. To help readers practice what he preaches, Alex provides a free list of 300 agency e-mail contacts he has culled from the Web -- certainly worth the price of the book."

Cathy Flick

[The Translation Journal - Web Surfing for Fun and Profit](#)

Scientific translator since 1978

"Dear Alex,

I've now finished reading [How to Earn \\$80,000+ Per Year as a Freelance Translator](#) and have found it to be very interesting indeed. I'm sure that any 'budding linguist' will find it a very useful tool/guide to setting themselves up in their own business. There's also many 'established' translators I know of that ought to read this as well!

I found it very 'punchy', easy and straightforward to read, which I feel is very important when you compare it to some of the publications and training manuals that I've read in the past. Having a 'No Nonsense' attitude towards the reader means that the interest is held and it doesn't drone on and become just another 'instruction manual'. I can liken it to 'listening to good advice from a good friend over a drink!'"

Mike Taylor

Director of Translation

[Choice Language Services](#)

*"An excellent 'How To' book for all translators, both new and already established. If only all freelance translators worked this way! All our lives would be easier. And we'd have more time to spend chasing clients for work to give to translators. I strongly recommend that **all** freelance translators read this book and take heed of its sensible, well thought-out advice."*

Siân Marlow

Head of Translation

UPS Translations - London

Please visit <http://www.translatortips.com/ht50.html> to find out more.

On the next page is the full Table of Contents for...

[How to Earn \\$80,000+ per Year as a Freelance Translator](#)

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