

industry focus

vendor/client partnerships

dream or reality?

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The terms "partnership" and "partner" are frequently used in business publications, often without a sense of the true meaning. It's quite popular to talk about a "partnership" or being a "business partner" without much thought for what is actually meant and implied by these terms. The etymology of the word "partner" shows that the word comes from an Old French word, "parçon," meaning "division or share." That sense of sharing continues into the modern usage of the word: sharing responsibilities, sharing rewards, and sharing information. Sharing also implies that both parties to a partnership have some responsibility for the success or failure of a project. It seems, however, the word partnership is overused and has lost its meaning.

In the past 17 years, I have been involved in many so-called partnerships with clients. I have reached some interesting conclusions that leave me wondering whether a real partnership is possible. I have seen clients that are more than happy to call you a partner, but that are unwilling or unable to share helpful information. I have often seen a lack of trust: an unwillingness to take you at your word and to work with you cooperatively, a constant questioning of why you need the things you are

requesting. It also seems quite common for clients to blame the service provider for the failure of a project (for example, late deliveries or cost overruns), without accepting any blame for having been part of the process. In essence, everyone likes to talk about partnerships, since it sounds good, but few clients really want to experience both the success and the failure that become a part of any business relationship over time.

In the translation and localization industry, it seems that partnerships between clients and service providers are more tenuous than in the general business world. There appears to be an inherent dichotomy in the development of the relationship: the client is willing to trust you to provide a service in a language that he can rarely understand, but is unwilling to include you early in the documentation creation process. This type of relationship means that often the localization service

provider is called at the last stage in the process. English content has been created and finalized, layouts have been set, and deadlines fixed. Any opportunity at helping to create a more efficient and perhaps less costly process has been quashed.

I think there are several reasons these problems exist. First, there are historical reasons. In the mid to late 80s, when demand for translation was increasing, and translation companies were in relatively short supply, clients often would be relieved to find someone—anyone—who could do what they needed in the languages requested. There was little or no effort to educate clients on making good buying decisions. The focus was on getting the job done and meeting ever-increasing demand. Clients were willing to work with any company that presented itself well.

In the early 90s, the situation started to change. More translation companies appeared, helping to address the still-increasing demand for services. The result



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was greater competition, which put clients in the crosshairs. Clients started getting mailings, seeing ads, and being inundated with sales calls from potential translation providers.

In the mid to late 90s, when clients started spending serious money on translation and localization, they started to find ways to control costs. Often, clients did not see localization vendors as resources, but as annoying sales organizations. Clients used information they had gathered to find ways to control the production of foreign language documentation, but often did not embrace localization providers as partners. In addition, clients were often disappointed by translation and localization providers that were unable to deliver as promised. Clients experienced poor quality, late deliveries, and shoddy customer service. These bad experiences made clients wary.

This wariness has been furthered by the "commoditization" of translation. By defining translation as a service that can be bought on a per-word basis, the value of the process has been diminished or eliminated. When purchasing decisions are made on the bottom-line price, there is no opportunity to demonstrate the value that would force clients to view translation and localization as the professional services they are. There is little or no concern about the process behind the price, only concern for how one per-word price compares to a competitor's. A perfect example of this approach is the online auction process that some large organizations have undertaken to control costs. Such a willingness to commoditize translation comes from an unwillingness to develop partnerships.

Of course, part of the blame for this approach resides on the service providers themselves. Over the years, in an attempt to educate the public, the emphasis has been on teaching how to control costs. Reducing word counts leads to a less expensive translation, but little attention has been paid to the quality control process, and little, if any, attention has been paid to the value of a really good translator, one who might command higher prices in return for better quality.

An important and somewhat unusual feature of the translation and localization industry is that very often clients are unwilling to sign real contracts that spell out the terms of a long-term agreement. These are different from purchase orders, both in terms of duration and in the requirements of both parties. Because the client often doesn't know how much translation work will be required, he doesn't want to commit to something that might be unneeded. Additionally, if the client is unsure

about the service provider, the lack of a contract allows the client an easy way out of the relationship.

Since there has been no organized effort to promote best practices among translation companies, clients have difficulty distinguishing one vendor from another. Without basic standards to compare one company with another, clients are left to their own judgments, which are often based on unimportant criteria such as turnaround time, number of languages offered, and payment terms. The recent efforts of organizations such as The Association of Language Companies to develop guidelines for language companies in the United States should provide a welcome resource for clients.

I believe there are several elements to a good professional business partnership:

- **Communication:** Each party must agree to communicate frequently and clearly, even if the communication is not positive. In the absence of communication, both parties can draw inaccurate conclusions.
- **Expectations:** Clear expectations must be set regarding what each party in the relationship can expect of the other, and the consequences if those expectations are not met. The client must be willing to take his or her share of the bad outcome as well as the good.
- **Willingness to share:** If both parties are unwilling to share important information about internal processes and procedures, there may be a lack of trust, which is not a good sign for the partnership.

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- **Trust:** Obviously, trust is built over time. Beginning a new partnership, however, involves a leap of faith that you have made the right choice; both sides must trust each other until circumstances prove otherwise. Build trust by mitigating negative circumstances through communication and by resolving problems as a team.

- **Long-term commitment:** If you have done your homework, you shouldn't be afraid to make a long-term commitment. If you truly trust that you've made the right choice, the commitment should be easy. It doesn't necessarily have to be a contract. A verbal commitment to work together is key to helping overcome the speed bumps that characterize any new endeavor. In a true partnership, both parties will have to commit time, staff, and money to make the partnership a success.

Despite my experiences with some partnerships and despite the reasons I've shared that can challenge partnerships, I am ever hopeful it is possible to develop a good partnership. I believe a client can truly benefit from a long-term partnership with a qualified translation or localization provider. The benefits of such a partnership greatly outweigh the effort involved in keeping it going. In such a partnership, both sides benefit.

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client letter to the editor continued...

client letter continued:

experts on the client side also need to fight for the promotion of people to the positions of divisional or corporate globalization officer (DGO and CGO, respectively). These could be people from their business who also have a deep understanding of language technologies and localization, as well as the larger issues of globalization. In these types of positions, the DGO or CGO can manage and champion their various globalization-related activities in a unified and integrated manner. These then would have the expertise and authority to work with globalization vendors to have their needs met.

Come to think of it, wouldn't this apply to globalization vendors themselves? And might it not be advantageous for them to try it and thereby serve as a model of these very behaviors?

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vendor letter to the editor continued...

vendor letter continued:

certain energy and telecom firms). Unfortunately, the comparison is also supremely ironic. Our industry lacks many of the hallmarks of professionalism of those industries. We have few standards, little training, and no significant certification processes. At this point, we can only aspire to become like those industries.

But, boy, do we aspire! GALA and other like-minded organizations are actively looking for ways to define the industry, help it mature, and give clients and buyers what they want and need. Our initiatives include: standardizing the RFQ process, so that clients can more easily compare responses from vendors, and those vendors can spend less time delivering different RFQ responses every time they try to win business; joint projects among vendors to help highlight the benefits of complete solutions and properly quality-controlled localization (which will help client-side managers press for adequate budgets and resources); and cost-sharing on marketing efforts to allow vendors to focus on providing quality deliverables at a lower cost of sale.

Input from clients and others in our industry, even in the form of criticism, will help keep us on the right track. So, thank you, and let's all keep up the good work!