Can't decide how many vendors you need?

Know your options.

How to Manage Multiple Translation Vendors

The benefits of working with a single translation vendor are clear. You create a strong partnership with one company (and possibly even one project manager!). They know exactly what you want so you spend less time scoping out each project. They may even learn your processes well enough to anticipate potential hiccups and offer advance solutions.

There are also arguments in favor of a multi-vendor strategy. These arguments revolve around risk avoidance. You avoid relying on a single vendor whose quality of service could prove inconsistent or unreliable over time. You avoid bottlenecks and timeline delays by distributing the translation load.

In determining which strategy is best for your team, it's important to be aware of the ways in which sourcing translation is different from purchasing other goods and services. In particular, you should know how your vendors use translation memories and terminology management to keep long-term costs low and provide you with consistent translations.

Translation Memories

Nearly* every project you send to a professional translation vendor will be used to build a translation memory (TM) database. This is a database that stores past translations, which can be leveraged again for future use. It enables your vendor to provide you with discounts when you ask them to translate the same thing over multiple projects. Translation memories are created via Computer-Assisted Translation (CAT) software that stores, sentence by sentence, translations performed by professional (human) translators. Let's assume your team has drafted a new informed consent for a second clinical trial. If you borrow content from your original ICF, your vendor can leverage the translation memory they have built for you for two key purposes:
- to ensure the translations in both ICFs are consistent,
- to charge only a fraction of the original cost for the second ICF.

To learn more about translation memories, read our brief on TM Best Practices.

TM versus MT

Don't confuse TM (translation memory) with MT (machine translation). Human translators use TMs to cross-reference previous translations and client-specific terminology; MT technology relies upon previously translated corpora, linguistic rules, and machine-based learning to automate translation.

Terminology Management

When your team uses consistent terms in talking about your product, you expect your translation vendor to do the same for translated terms. For example, if your user documentation describes the "swivel arm" of the device, your marketing brochures shouldn't talk about a "rotating arm." Translation vendors build glossaries and termbases in order to keep translated terminology consistent over time and across documents.

*Where TMs Don't Really Matter

The technology behind translation memories relies on consistent input. The same sentence in the same document format (for example, Adobe InDesign) will reliably be matched over time (this is also known as a "100% match"). The same sentence in a different document format (for example, an InDesign file that has been transitioned to Microsoft Word) will get close to an exact match (e.g. "99% match") due to slight differences in the way Adobe and Microsoft store content.

Certain document types, however, are not "TM-friendly." In particular, the content of PDF files cannot be reliably "read" by translation memory technology. This is because a PDF is neither a word processing tool nor a desktop publishing application; it is merely a compressed print-preview replication of the original document format. For this reason, PDF files are not automatically used together with TM technology by professional translation vendors unless they can be transitioned to a TM-friendly format.

So how do you take advantage of these cost-saving tools if you work with more than one approved vendor?

You **can** have your cake and eat it, too. The key is to ensure a logical split in how you distribute translation projects. For medical device manufacturers, pharmaceutical developers, or biotechnology companies, the most logical division is usually by product line. For third parties, such as contract research organizations or institutional review boards, it is typically easiest to divide projects by sponsor.

Let's consider the translation needs of Acme Medical. They have four international products: Product A, Product B, Product X, and Product Z. They also have two translation vendors, Vendor 1 and Vendor 2, both of whom offer similar costs and equivalent levels of service, quality, and certification. By assigning Products A and B to Vendor 1 and Products X and Z to Vendor 2, Acme reaps all the benefits of a multi-vendor strategy. Both vendors can build translation memories and manage terminology for the products they translate, thereby taking advantage of standard translation tools to better serve Acme's team.

What happens if Acme doesn't establish a logical division? What if the initial translations for Product A package inserts were done by Vendor 1, but Vendor 2 is tasked with an update? This creates several possible inefficiencies.

Inefficiency #1: The Costly Review Cycle

Vendor 2 cannot control the processes used by Vendor 1 and must ensure that the quality is acceptable before giving it their stamp of approval. So Vendor 2 insists upon charging to review all of the work performed by Vendor 1 before releasing a certificate of translation. This is not uncommon, especially for translation vendors who serve clientele in the life sciences industry where regulations are strict and quality management systems are robust.

Inefficiency #2: The Frankenstein Document

Acme doesn't want to pay for the full review, so they instruct Vendor 2 to translate only the text that has changed and exclude all other content from the project scope. This keeps costs low for the update, but the resulting hybrid document creates several new problems:

- Neither vendor's translation memory contains the full, current content, which will make the next update even more complicated.
- Acme's team must manage multiple certificates of translation for the same package insert: one for the original translation and one for the updates.
- Even if instructed not to do so, Vendor 2 may be forced to make changes to the existing translation outside of the updates (for example, to ensure correct grammar is used around updated text), which voids all or part of Vendor 1's certification of the original translation.
- Vendor 2 doesn't have access to Vendor 1's terminology management tools. They will need to either forego terminology consistency or charge extra to re-create a glossary before the project begins. If they give up consistency, we have "swivel arms" and "rotating arms" living in the same document. If they don't, Acme is paying both vendors to build the same glossary.

Don't create a bidding war

It's tempting to ask multiple vendors for a bid on every project. Ultimately, however, this process will undermine both your long-term savings and your multiple vendor strategy.

Cost Savings

If you have two or more vendors whose pricing is consistently similar, bidding out each project may lead to a non-optimized distribution of products. Check out the inefficiencies described below to learn how this impacts cost, quality, and ease-of-use.

Vendor Strategy

If one of your vendors always submits the cheapest bid, you'll create a de facto single vendor process as this vendor builds a robust translation memory. You also run the risk, over time, of alienating the other vendors who devote time to bidding project after project, but never win a bid.

Pick the right tool for the job

Not all "quality" translation vendors are created equal. Some vendors can handle medical content, but are not specialized in serving the life sciences community. As a result, their processes may not be sufficiently robust and could lead to supplier qualification questions during a notified body audit. When selecting translation vendors (whether you want just one or a whole armada), make sure you know exactly what you're getting for each dollar spent. Our brief on handling translation questions in a regulatory audit could be useful in determining your selection criteria.

What if the two vendors could work together, sharing translation memories and terminology tools? It is possible to create such a scenario, but it requires a high level involvement from your team. Unless you purchase (and maintain!) an expensive content management system, someone from your team will need to regularly request the TMs and terminology tools from both vendors, consolidate them, and then re-distribute. And when a mistake is found in the translation, it may be difficult to determine which vendor introduced the problem. If you're considering this strategy, make certain that the person managing translations for your team has extensive experience in translation processes and software.

If you are a small-to-medium organization, you might want to consider the size of your overall translation budget to determine whether it can support more than one vendor. Consolidation has greatly affected the translation industry in the past few years and you don't want to split your budget into pieces so small that you become a relatively insignificant client for both your vendors.

If you are considering a multi-vendor strategy, prime your organization for success:

- Understand why you want more than one vendor. You may want to have a candid conversation with your current vendor so they understand your concerns and aren't taken by surprise when you mention that you're talking to another agency. (Check out our brief on how to balance cost and quality for more vendor management ideas.)
- Decide how projects will be distributed and inform your vendors accordingly.
- Confirm that you'll be sending enough work to keep each vendor happy. If your volume of requests is too low to support multiple vendors, designating a single vendor might be the best solution.
- Identify a key member of staff who understands translations and can keep the process optimized.

About Idem Translations

Founded in 1983, Idem Translations, Inc. is a full-service provider of translation and localization services. Idem specializes in certified translations for medical device, biomedical, and pharmaceutical companies, as well as other organizations and entities working in the life sciences sector, such as contract research organizations (CROs), healthcare research centers, and institutional review boards (IRBs). The company is a WBENC-certified woman-owned business and holds certifications to ISO 9001:2015, ISO 13485:2003, and ISO 17100:2015.

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