



Evaluating Potential Translation Suppliers

Purchasing translation services for the first time can be a daunting task. You have hundreds of potential suppliers to choose from and limited means for comparison shopping. Oh, and you probably have someone in your organization telling you that they needed translations yesterday!

This brief gives you the tools you need to evaluate potential translation suppliers and determine which one will be the right vendor for your organization. It will help you understand:

- the options available to you,
- the questions to ask of prospective suppliers, and
- how to avoid comparing apples to oranges.

We have consolidated the key criteria you should consider during your vendor evaluation process into our version of the three F's: focus, function, and fit.

Focus

Translation agencies come in many shapes and sizes, from industry specialists to jacks-of-all-trades. So the first thing you want to know about a translation service provider is their focus: what kinds of content do they translate? Are they focused solely on medical translations or do they handle anything, from medical to automotive to aerospace?

The content focus of a translation service provider ultimately determines the makeup of their translator pool. In today's translation industry, the vast majority of qualified translators operate as freelancers, selling their skills to multiple agencies around the world. In order to vet a potential translator, most agencies ask them to complete a small "test translation."

This is to ensure that each translator can demonstrate the necessary skills to accurately handle the kinds of documents they will need to translate. You clearly don't want an automotive translator working on a medical device manual, or a pharmaceutical specialist translating financial statements. In most cases, the more specialized the agency, the more specialized their testing.

You may find that you want some kind of assurance that the translators used by the agency are truly qualified for the job. There are two things you can do to gain that assurance:

1. Request that the provider let you perform an on-site audit so you can gain a better understanding of their processes, including how translators are qualified and tested.

The Price Trap

Don't trust a price list. As part of your process to compare and vet translation suppliers, you should get a sample quotation on a realistic project. The closer to a real project this actually is, the more informative the sample quotations will be. For example, you could have several vendors quote on translating your current IFU, informed consent, or prescribing information into the key languages that you intend to target.

A sample quotation will not only give you an idea of pricing and turnaround, it will show you how responsive each potential vendor is to your quotation request and it will help you gauge the added value that each vendor may bring to the table when you assign them with real projects. One supplier may be very fast, one supplier may be very cheap, and a third may be in the middle, but asking pertinent questions that can help save you money in the long run.

But beware, even with a sample quotation, it will not always be easy to ensure that the various vendors are truly bidding for the same level of service. Make sure that your specifications are very clear on:

- Whether you require that the translation be independently edited.
- What format(s) should be delivered after the translation is complete.
- Whether the translation must be certified.

2. Do your own verification on an early or sample project. Identify a qualified reviewer in your organization who speaks the language and knows the product, then ask them to validate the translation. This has the added benefit of creating a dialogue where your team can share key terms that they prefer with your translation provider.

An in-country review process or an on-site audit builds a deeper relationship of trust between you and the translation provider, allowing you to intensify the relationship as your international translation needs grow.

Checklist: Focus

- ✓ How many different industries does the translation provider support?
- ✓ If they are specialized in serving a specific industry, do they demonstrate this specialization in their processes?
- ✓ What requirements are in place for their translators?
- ✓ How is the quality of their translators monitored over time?

Function

As a life sciences professional, you know the value of good processes and you want your translation service provider to offer consistent, reliable translations. Do they use one translator per project or many? Does someone check their work? In order to understand the quality controls in place, you'll need to know just how many individuals are on the team for each translation project and what kind of checks and balances exist to manage their outputs.

You also want to know that, if something goes wrong, the translation provider has a way to capture your feedback, identify the root cause of the problem, and correct it for future projects. These are, of course, fundamentals to any ISO 9001 quality management system. So you may want to consider what independent quality certifications the provider maintains.

Even better, you want a translation partner who helps you reduce risk. From a translation perspective, this can mean anything from identifying errors and ambiguities in your source documentation to suggesting improvements on optimized file formats for your content. Avoid vendors who say "yes" to anything you ask and then deliver translations that solve short-term problems and cause long-term headaches.

Most importantly, make certain that the vendor you select will meet your internal supplier requirements so that you don't have to tackle hard questions when your notified body comes to audit. For more information on quality system requirements for translators and how to answer translation questions in an audit, check out [this brief](#).

Checklist: Function

- ✓ How many translators work on each project?
 - If more than one, how is consistency maintained for translated terminology?
- ✓ Does someone check the translator's work before it is delivered to you?
- ✓ Does the vendor have a mechanism for handling complaints?
- ✓ Do they have a mechanism for improving their process when they make mistakes?
- ✓ Do they hold any ISO certifications (9001, 13485, 17100)?
 - If they are a large organization, are all offices listed on the quality system certificates?
 - If they claim 'compliance' to an international standard, can they produce a certificate from a reputable third-party auditor?

Fit

Synergy = savings. You want great synergy with your translation provider so you can create an enduring partnership that saves you time and headaches for many years to come.

Different companies have different styles of doing business. If your team is very organized and quality-minded, you will expect these same qualities in your vendors. If your team is charged with handling rapid-fire responses to regulatory authorities, you need vendors who understand your compressed timelines. If budgets are particularly tight for your team, you will want vendors who can make the most out of every penny.

Size should not be a primary factor in your vendor search (see boxed text: The Size Trap). While you obviously need a reputable and reliable provider, the key to getting the right fit is finding a partner who can satisfy the various strategic needs of your organization. For example, the people on your team who request translated documents want a provider who is responsive and adaptable. Your Quality department will oblige the provider to meet certain internal requirements, such as signing a Quality Agreement. Your Accounting team will need the provider to comply with certain payment practices. It is worth vetting prospective vendors against the full list of your organization's requirements.

Checklist: Fit

- ✓ How valuable will your business be to this vendor?
- ✓ How quick are they to respond to your queries?
- ✓ Will they be able to meet the demands of your team (quality, timeline, budget)?
- ✓ How will they do better than your last vendor?

The Size Trap

A key consideration as you select a translation vendor, especially if you are planning to single-source, is whether the vendor can handle the workload you have to offer. This may lead you to automatically favoring large translation service providers in your search.

But beware: large translation agencies handle the content of many different industries. Their annual sales numbers or gross headcount can be very large, but that tells you very little about the size of the team that actually handles projects in your industry.

Rather than focus on size, focus on satisfaction. Ask for referrals of other clients working in similar therapeutic areas or operating at a similar size to your own. Feedback from real customers will tell you not only whether the translation vendor keeps its customers happy, it will also confirm for you that the vendor has experience with a similar device or drug to your own.

Summary

The key is to consider prospective translation providers holistically: do they **focus** on the type of content you need, do they **function** with processes that help you ensure a high-quality product, and do they **fit** seamlessly into the ethos your organization?

Good translations don't come cheap, so you want to spend your money wisely. By finding a solid partner for translations who can meet your team's long-term needs, you can save yourself from wasting time managing your vendor and benefit, instead, from a partnership that makes translations hassle-free. If you're thinking about onboarding more than one vendor, check out [this brief](#) to plan how you will share the workload without giving up cost savings.

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, healthcare research centers, and institutional review boards. 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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