



The Cost of Cheap Translations

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If you are buying translation services for the first time, it can be daunting to compare one vendor to another. How do you know whether a given translation provider will have qualified translators who can handle your specific content? How do you know what you are getting for each dollar you spend? With so many variables, it is easy to focus your comparison on price. But buyer beware: the cheapest vendor on paper often turns out to be the most expensive when you tally the final numbers.

This executive brief takes you behind the scenes of the translation process to help you understand why the vendor quoting the lowest rates will usually cost you more, overall, than a qualified, professional agency.

What Goes Into the Per-Word Price?

Most translation companies in the United States charge translation on a per-word basis. But not every company includes the same services in that price-per-word. For some companies, the price includes translation, independent editing, and quality control; for others, it only includes the first draft translation and you must pay extra for quality assurance measures like a second linguist review. To confuse things further, some translation providers include editing in their price...but they perform such editing on a sampling basis rather than on each and every word, which means that portions of your project might not undergo an independent editing review to verify the quality of the draft translation.

In addition to the cost of the actual translation work, there are costs associated with engineering and formatting a polished final deliverable that you can print, distribute, or post online. These services are typically charged on an hourly basis, over and above the base costs associated with the linguistic work of the translation itself. Here again, different providers include different services in their hourly cost, such as quality control of the final, formatted document or preparatory work that needs to be completed to make text accessible to the translator.

And then there are invisible costs associated with the long-term management of each client's [translation memory](#) and stylistic preferences. Although nearly all translation providers build translation memories as part of their services, some translation providers are significantly more serious in their mandate to manage a client's translation history for long-term consistency and cost savings. These providers dedicate their in-house project management resources to updating each translation memory with the final, approved version of each translation, including any issues identified at quality control or post-delivery requests from the client. Less committed providers often rely upon project translators to update the memory, which means that downstream changes are not properly integrated and available for future translation projects.

As a result of all these differences, pricing varies drastically from one translation provider to the next. Providers who offer lower rates are typically performing fewer verification steps on the translation. And less verification can lead to more problems down the road, such as costly mistranslations.

Food for Thought

- ✓ What steps are taken to ensure that all translated text is saved to a translation memory for future projects?
- ✓ Is this translation memory actively managed by a dedicated project manager?
- ✓ How many pairs of eyes look at each project?
- ✓ Are independent editing and quality control reviews performed on all projects or are these only performed on a sampling basis?

Why Does a Quality System Matter?

Now that you understand how translation providers charge for their services, you can begin to understand the importance of a quality management system. Fundamental quality standards, such as ISO 9001, [ISO 13485](#), and ISO 17100, keep a company focused on product quality, customer satisfaction, and continually improving the level of service that they provide. In order to achieve and maintain certification to such quality standards, a translation provider must have process controls in place that ensure that the translators and formatting professionals with whom they work are consistently providing top-notch work. A quality system must also ensure that the translation provider has ways to recognize mistakes, determine the root cause of errors, and create process improvements that will prevent the same mistake from being made again in the future. Quality systems are independently audited on an annual basis for re-certification.

Many translation providers are certified to such standards, Many others, however, claim “compliance” without any independent oversight of a certification audit. Such “compliant” companies often have weaker supplier management processes, using untested translators or farming out translation projects wholesale to third party vendors with little or no control over how that third party performs the work.

As a result, translation providers who do not operate under a strict quality management system can be “hit-or-miss,” leaving you at the mercy of the particular translator who is assigned your project. An established quality system, on the other hand, enables a provider to offer consistency from one project (and one translator team) to the next through rigorously defined processes and feedback mechanisms. Certified translation providers should be able to offer you up-to-date metrics on their on-time delivery rates and the percentage of their deliveries that are accepted without the need for revision or re-work.

Food for Thought

- ✓ What quality system certificates does your vendor hold?
- ✓ What is their on-time delivery rate for the current year? The past five years?
- ✓ How often are clients complaining and returning translations for re-work?

What Are the Hidden Costs?

You now understand how a lower price-per-word for translation often correlates with a less rigorous quality management system. Cheaper translation providers can save on their own costs by shortcutting quality and paying fewer professionals in the translation process whereas certified, high-quality vendors create a robust system of checks-and-balances to keep deliveries on-time and error-free.

So what happens when your company picks the cheap vendor? The answer depends upon the rigor of your own verification processes and how quickly you identify any quality issues that may exist in the translations. If your internal team has the capability and bandwidth to review translations, you may spot the issues immediately, but this may kick-off a never-ending cycle of corrections that ultimately delays your time to market. If quality issues with the translations do not come to light

until you have distributed materials or submitted to regulators, you may be facing the costs of re-printing, re-submission, or even a product recall. In all of these situations, the cost is likely higher than the quoted differential between the cheap vendor and the certified vendor with stellar quality metrics.

Food for Thought

- ✓ Do you have a robust system for reviewing translations?
- ✓ Can you afford a delay in your product launch schedule if something goes awry with the translations?
- ✓ Are you prepared to field complaints from OUS markets about translation quality?
- ✓ Have you considered the cost of a potential recall if a major error that could cause patient harm is identified in distributed materials?

The cheapest translation vendor may ultimately cost you more if you are forced to grapple with delays to your international launch dates and compelled to pay extra to have your existing translations re-worked due to quality issues. Rather than save a few pennies in the short-term, create long-term savings by building up a reliable translation memory with a qualified partner whose translations you can continue to use for years to come.

Further Reading

- How to maximize your return on translation investment ([link](#))
- Ways to balance translation cost and quality ([link](#))
- What to consider when evaluating translation suppliers ([link](#))

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 13485:2016, and ISO 17100:2015.

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