As globalization marches on, virtually every business is adjusting both its operations and its expectations, eager to take advantage of an ever-shrinking world. Customers can now be found on every continent, often with just the click of a mouse. But while technology provides a way to connect, true communication can only occur when you can, quite literally, speak (or write in) the customer’s language.

That’s why there is now a surging demand for what are often dubbed “language access services.” The two most common forms are interpretation (done in real time and usually face-to-face) and translation (which typically involves the written word, be it for websites, print collateral, training materials, legal documents, etc.). Milena Savova, director of the Department of Foreign Languages, Translation, and Interpreting at New York University’s School of Professional Studies, says the language-access industry is one of the top five fastest-growing in the U.S., projected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to grow 46 percent between 2012-2022.

“Online content is typically where a lot of businesses start,” says Camilo Munoz, founder and CEO of Houston-based Translation Source, Ltd. and president of The Association of Language Companies. “Beyond that, demand is generally driven by specific needs.”

In part because the barriers to entry are low, translation services is a fragmented industry. Monique Bew-Sullivan, COO of Niki’s Int’l Ltd., a woman-owned translation services business based in Charlotte, North Carolina, estimates that more than 90 percent of companies are sole proprietorships. Fragmentation and a lack of standardized quality control can make finding the right translation services partner a challenge. “For small, local projects in a single language, an individual linguist is usually the most cost-efficient option,” Bew-Sullivan says. “For larger projects—those requiring a variety of languages or services in various geographic areas—an agency is your best bet.”

One benefit of all that fragmentation is that there is plenty of specialization available; do your homework and you will certainly find a company whose expertise is perfect for what you need. The Association of Language Companies functions as an important initial filter for screening prospects. The association was formed to provide timely information, tools, and professional development opportunities to its members. “Membership is not mandatory, so belonging says a lot about your company. It demonstrates a commitment to quality and staying on top of best practices in the industry,” Munoz says. “ALC member companies invest significant time and money in their profession and their industry.”

Networking with other businesses in your industry that have used a provider can help narrow the field. “Always ask for the resumes of linguists who will work on your project, as well as a list of clients and industries the prospective provider has worked with,” Bew-Sullivan advises. “If your project is a sensitive translation, or you just want to be sure of the quality, also ask for a sample.”

Todd Gregory, brand strategist at Houston-based On-Target! Marketing & Advertising, has worked extensively with translation services providers. He stresses the importance of interviewing multiple candidates to assess how well they understand the full context of the project.

Of course, it’s also important to screen prospects for basic business fundamentals, such as their availability, responsiveness, and transparency on pricing and deadlines. As Bew-Sullivan says, “A true professional will take the time to educate you about what they can and cannot do.”
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