

begins at home

By Hans Fenstermacher

copier, the company cafeteria, the CEO's last speech, the company's latest software system. Heck, even the new toilet paper gets critiqued.



We tend to spend a lot of time talking about quality. We rave or rage about acting performances; we tell others about good shopping values; and restaurants thrive or bomb on patrons' words about their food and service. In our jobs, too, quality is part of daily conversation: the

So why don't we talk more about quality in localization? After all, it must be at least as important as some of those other subjects. Yet, time and again - especially in discussions about buying localization - pricing and turnaround time seem to take up the whole agenda. Why is that? There is more than one answer to that question, but let me suggest a few reasons (presented without endorsement or rebuttal):

QUALITY IS EXPECTED.

The constituencies that make up the localization supply chain take for granted that those upstream have done their job. Product developers assume sales and marketing know what the market wants. Content authors assume product developers got the product specs right. Technical publications managers assume the authors have documented the product correctly (why else are editors a thing of the past?). Localization suppliers assume the managers are providing complete content. Translators assume the content is correct and consistent; localization project managers assume translators have reproduced the meaning faithfully and fully. And absolutely everyone down the line apparently assumes that Translation Memories are pure as the driven snow (whatever you do, don't review the 100% matches!). Only in software localization is there any actual testing of linguistic quality (you can't call what in-country reviewers do to localized tech pubs "testing"), but localization testing is basically an extension of product QA. As far as translation goes, (high) quality is just an expected attribute of localization services.

BUYERS DON'T CARE ABOUT QUALITY.

Suppliers routinely berate buyers (not to their face, of course) for not valuing quality. Buying decisions appear to be made based on other criteria (price, turnaround time, etc.). The conditions for localization aren't made to be conducive to quality, either: less and less time is provided to get the job done properly; everyone is desperate for ways to automate every step in the process; more and more tasks are going to dirt-cheap, offshore locations. And localization pricing offers (to some people) conclusive proof that buyers don't care about quality: it's

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Hans founded ArchiText® in 1994 after a successful 15-year career in technical communication and translation, including experience with some of today's industry leaders.

He started a different kind of company because he realized that localizers were really in the same business as their clients: building good communications with customers all over the world. Since then, ArchiText has grown into a well-established provider of localization and multilingual services to Fortune 2000 companies.

a relentless race to the bottom (the automotive industry has for years expressed the intention of driving costs to a penny a word).

LOCALIZATION IS A COMMODITY.

The commodity argument combines the first two above. Words have become (always were?) a commodity like milk, soybeans, pork bellies, and so on. Quality is irrelevant (I expect it to be there, so why should I care?); the only thing that matters is price. From the top of the industry on down, we have even begun to adopt commodity language when talking about translation: “high-churn,” “micro-drop,” “fast-turnaround” (sounds like a Starbucks® barista’s dream, doesn’t it?). The IT industry - the avant-garde in localization trends - leads the way in featurizing translation, along with everything else in its products, in the hopes of turning it into a commodity component like microchips.

LOCALIZATION ISN'T IMPORTANT.

Quality in localization is a moot point anyhow (so the argument goes) because localization itself doesn't really matter. Even in companies where non-domestic revenue makes up a significant percentage of total sales, localization isn't a strategic decision. Localization budgets are constantly being squeezed, even though many companies spend less on localization than on toilet paper (maybe that's why toilet paper gets more airtime, so to speak,

than localization? But I digress...). Veteran companies with notable localization programs are now re-thinking which languages to support, letting the markets indicate - ex post facto (that's Latin for “wait till somebody asks for it”) - when localization is needed.

THE SOURCE CONTENT IS ALREADY WRITTEN.

This argument is buried deeper in the supply chain (and the psyche). Buyers have a hard time understanding why localization/translation is so complex and time-consuming (“just translate it!”). Translation intuitively feels like a task that technology should be able to perform (MT anyone?). Writing source content is the creative, i.e. hard, part; translation simply “converts” that creation into another “format” (so it shouldn't cost as much, either). Quality is a characteristic of the source content, and translation quality merely reflects that fact.

Now, none of these arguments is valid in their entirety, but everyone in localization can find some truth in any of them. We all prefer better quality, but how can we achieve it? We need to stop all the assuming and start proactively driving quality to

the forefront. To do that, we need to agree on what quality is and where it comes from.

Localization suppliers say, we put in lots of effort and workflow and technology and project management and customer hand-holding, so we are offering high-quality services. Tools suppliers say, we put in lots of features and upgrades and interoperability and scalability, so we are providing high-quality products. Translators say, we put in lots of hours and work and creativity and linguistic skills, so we are creating high-quality language. Technical writers say, we put in lots of hours and work and creativity and usability and clarity and customer experience, so we are producing high-quality content. Ask anybody in the localization supply chain, and you get the distinct impression that the whole process is overflowing with quality (which it patently isn't).

As management guru Peter Drucker once wrote, “‘Quality’ in a product or service is not what the supplier puts in. It is what the customer gets out and is willing to pay for.” If that is true, this means that localization buyers get exactly the quality they deserve. The good news is that buyers can and should support their expectation of quality with commensurate remuneration; the bad news is that all the moaning and groaning about quality by suppliers is feckless and irresponsible.

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A few things are going to have to change for quality to take a more central role in localization:

First of all, customers in non-English-speaking countries must demand properly localized products. Consumers in Spain, Saudi Arabia and Singapore might, for instance, simply refuse to buy non-localized products; or they might demand pricing concessions from the manufacturer for untranslated products; they might even sue manufacturers for bringing “defective” products to market (actually, that’s the law in the EU). Until customers in local markets speak clearly and loudly with their wallets, producers of unlocalized, poorly or partially localized products will go right on assuming they’re hitting their quality targets. (I’m not sure I would even blame them!)

Companies who buy localization need to start really listening to their global end-customers, identifying how much quality they want and what they’re willing to pay for it. Then they need to buy localization at a price that incentivizes suppliers to provide that level of quality. Content authors must help their companies connect the dots between what they produce and what comes out in translation. After all, content is evidence of the quality companies desire; the rest of the supply chain will take its cue from that.

Localization suppliers have got to stop bemoaning the “lost art of quality” and start making clear, tangible links between the circumstances surrounding localization and the results. Inadequate or lousy source content produces more inadequate or lousier translations. High word counts = high overall costs. Slashing

word rates to suppliers encourages fishing from the bottom of the quality barrel. Cutting turnaround time leads to cutting corners (too many translators, not enough QA, over-reliance on tools, etc.). Sticking automation on top of broken (or non-existent) workflow processes doesn’t fix those processes or the defective content they produce.

Suppliers and buyers can and should work together to define quality, but, in the end, suppliers must reconcile themselves to the fact that the quality buyers are willing to pay for is the quality suppliers must offer. Localization suppliers can’t be expected to raise quality so far downstream (and certainly not for free), buyers must pay more attention to the front end of the whole supply chain. To put it bluntly, quality begins at home.

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