Equipment suppliers and technicians talk to interpreters

If interpreters often feel overlooked, how must our neighbors behind the sound desk feel? I’ve always wondered how these people who keep everything running see their work, so I started asking. At the top of their wish list: lighter booths and easy room access. Along the way I noticed they also appreciate considerate interpreters.

My original focus was on the gripes, faves and raves of expert floor technicians. Their voice is important and will be heard, but the AV companies that provide simultaneous interpreting (SI) equipment and hire them play a central role in the process. As I looked for technicians to talk to, I kept running into managers, who like to tell the world: “Think of us when negotiating a contract.”

Audiovisual (and not just SI) Companies

Cross-selling is high on the AV company wish list. As they see it, consultant interpreters could help them secure the whole AV contract instead of “just” the interpreting: it helps ensure quality because all the equipment is compatible and the team better coordinated, it makes sense logistically, and of course it's better business.

Gerhard Koudelka of the Congress Rental Network[1] also points out that referrals work both ways. For instance, even if the AV company is the main contractor, documents and background information are best handled by the consultant interpreter directly. “It's much easier that way. If you feel there is a danger of being bypassed, then there's something wrong. It's a matter of trust.”

Moreover managers like consistency and think interpreters should always insist on the ISO standards they have fought so hard to define. “A team of SCIC interpreters once refused to work in some tiny booths stuck in a corner with no view of the room,” recalls Ms. Braccini. “We had to be called in at the last minute, with everybody waiting while the other company dismantled their installation and we put ours up. This shows that interpreters have the power, but they don’t always use it.”

Staffing Concerns

Finding the right people to work the booths is an important part of the large AV company's job. Dwight Moe, also of Congress Rental Network, looks for “a sweet personality”. Technicians might be hefting and setting up equipment in the snow or rain (or the scorching Mediterranean sun), but they still must look and act presentable around organisers, participants and interpreters. These are rare birds indeed – those with the best people skills are often reluctant to do the heavy lifting, and some of those willing to do the manual work may not represent the company in the best light.

Ms. Braccini describes a three-tier system fully deployed for larger events – senior technicians in
jacket and tie who speak English well, floor technicians in nice shirts who know how to act during the meeting, and runners in a company uniform.

Mr. Koudelka points out that SI technicians often lack career-track opportunities, and end up looking for them elsewhere.

Understanding Interpreters

The people I interviewed all demonstrated excellent awareness of our need for good sound, but one stood out. At a Future Events Experience presentation at the EIBTM trade fair last December, as a member of the audience I asked whether anyone had seen interpreting used in multiple-feed, online-cum-live events. (The answer: No.) Later I was approached by a gentleman who turned out to be Mr. Dwight Moe, who informed me that if I ever planned to use interpreters for an online event I should make sure I stated this clearly in the contract because they have intellectual property rights that have to be respected “especially if they are members of AIIC”. Kudos to Mr. Moe for raising the issue. This is how I met him and his partners at Congress Rental Network. In our interview he advised interpreters to apply a reasonable surcharge for recording and broadcasting rights.

Comic Interlude

Did you hear the one about the client who booked booths and sound equipment, but not interpreters? Guess what – it wasn't just once. “Clients often ask for 'translation machines' and assume it all comes in a package.”

On one occasion, a client who had neglected to book interpreters begged the floor technician to interpret the opening ceremony while he hunted for some. The technician “went into the booth and repeated the same kind of speech he had heard a thousand times” (along the lines of “thank you for coming, this is a great place, we're a wonderful organisation and this will be a great conference”) – nobody complained! (But the organiser was chastened.)

Michael Huss of Brähler shares a tale of shadowing – not some suspenseful John Le Carré scene, but the English booth turning a Japanese speaker's English rendition into something the other booths could use. He also points out that years ago, when he experienced this, not all equipment makes could readily provide for relay interpretation, so his equipment helped save the day.

Mr. Koudelka once happened to attend an event for which he had bid and lost. The languages were Arabic, Russian and Chinese. He saw a single booth in the beautifully done-up conference hall; two interpreters sat inside. Tuning in, he was stunned to hear both of them working at the same time from Arabic into Russian and Chinese. “Of course there was cross-talk, but nobody complained at the end of the day, because they had big fireworks and lots of big talk and fancy stuff, and some music and dancers.”

Detective Work

Ever had gremlins in the room? Mr. Albert Rivas, a freelance senior floor technician, wonders why things can suddenly go wrong after comprehensive testing showed everything was fine. It’s always a mystery and fortunately Mr. Rivas is a good detective – I’ve seen him at work.

Booth Manners From the Tech's Perspective

What are interpreters' worst habits? Surprisingly few technicians had anything to say about how we handle their precious equipment – just a shudder at the frequent proximity of water to electronics and a warning to make sure we don't inadvertently switch off the built-in mic when we plug our own headphones into the newer Bosch equipment. But work-proud Ms. Braccini wails, “Please, please don't play with your pens anywhere near the mic!” The sound company may get unfairly blamed for
the noise – it's irksome when they're doing excellent work!

Speaking of blame, it's just not fair or appropriate to blame the technicians when we've missed a beat. Mr. Koudelka feels this is mostly a thing of the past. He attributes a greater sense of teamwork these days to stiffer competition in the interpreting market. “The interpreters who helped me start my business – I started out in 1992 – were used to people calling them and asking if they could take on a job. They were shocked when things changed, and I had to explain how I did my marketing. Now they've lost that old attitude and they see themselves as part of the team.”

Leaving our mess behind is very inconsiderate – papers, tissue, candy wrappers, tangerine peels and the like mean extra work for the floor technician who has spent all day monitoring our input and output, and then must dismantle everything before he can go home.

Impatience while technicians reset the system can make things worse. Manuel Vargas of Audivarg 21 remarks that if interpreters fiddle with the latest Bosch consoles while any of them are being programmed or reprogrammed, the whole process will have to be reinitiated. This happened to him once in a 9-booth meeting: one interpreter changed a channel and eighteen consoles had to be reprogrammed!

Some floor technicians are annoyed that we seem to assume they know everything about the venue, from the location of the toilets to where to get water. “Sometimes we've been on the site about as long as the interpreters!” Others seem proud and happy to point interpreters in the right direction if asked nicely and at the right time.

Working at close quarters means that senses other than sight and hearing come into play. Cigarette smoke and gallons of Chanel No. 5 frequently permeated booths years ago, but Mr. Koudelka says this is no longer a problem.

**Heavy Booths**

What would you have guessed was the top grievance about SI equipment? Floor technicians and company managers all agree – ISO booths are too heavy! This means more staff, more time and more expense, especially when some venues have very small elevators or none at all!

Most managers, however, agree that ISO-standard booths are necessary for good soundproofing. Ms. Braccini says her company once went to the trouble of designing and manufacturing lighter booths and having them ISO-certified, but in the end they went back to the same vendor as everyone else – Audipack. ISO certification is always specified in her company's bids. Anyone aiming to design a new portable booth has to at least equal Audipack for sturdiness and appearance, but half the weight would be a killer. Unfortunately, the laws of physics make this very difficult.

**Test Early**

Testing is something all these technicians take seriously. For events important enough to require installation two or more days before the opening, the interpreters in charge should plan to inspect the facilities at least the day before to assure enough time for any necessary changes. Mr. Moe emphatically adds “It's in their own interest to do it even if it means arriving a day early at no extra pay.”

Mr. Vargas shares this view and reminds us that equipment testing should be over by the time participants are allowed into the room. Output testing should be done for every interpreter console, and the feed from each microphone should be tested – separately – from the booths.

**Feedback Needn’t Be High-pitched**

Sound problems occur and interpreters sometimes need to point it out, but technicians prefer
feedback to be given in straightforward manner. Please don’t make a big fuss or complain behind their backs. Rapping on the booth window at a technician already intent on fixing the problem is annoying, so please look before you leap.

They do appreciate a word of thanks when everything has gone without a hitch, as is usually the case with excellent professionals using good equipment, or when they’ve adroitly salvaged a nightmarish situation.

**Hotels and Venue Managers – Please Be Flexible**

I wondered what technicians might need from venues in case consultant interpreters (or clients) could bear such requests in mind. Flexible access to rooms (and lifts!) was the unanimous answer – it would make life easier for both AV companies and technicians. It's understandable for the hotel to keep its options open, but the cost and complexity of installing the equipment rises when setup cannot begin before 8 in a room that's been free since 2 – fast set-up requires more people. Also it grates to know that there's a lift when you've been forced to carry a lot of heavy equipment up and down staircases and through endless hallways. Consultant interpreters do well to consider setup time when they're booking the SI equipment themselves.

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[1] A worldwide network of AV companies that is a sponsor of the AIIC assembly.

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