The business of interpreting: FAQ 1 – How can I get more work?

All freelance conference interpreters want to know where the next paycheck will come from. There's no magic bullet for success, but good business sense goes a long way.

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One question tends to come up quite often these days among colleagues, both old and new: “What exactly can I wear/say/do to get more work?”

It is a plea to learn that special something, that “je ne sais quoi”, to make sure that we get work and make a living in our most fascinating, but very difficult, profession. Difficult not only because speakers are getting faster and presentations denser, but also because familiar job opportunities are becoming rarer. International organizations are cutting back on long and frequent conferences; and for those rarer days of work, they tend to hire people who are closer to the beginning of their careers because younger colleagues have a lower negotiated rate. So it is not only beginners who are looking for solutions; everyone is looking for that one wave of a magic wand, a magic bullet, without which they think their career is doomed.

In one way, everyone is right. The world has changed, and we haven’t yet changed with it. In the “good old days” (which always seem to be in the distant past for whoever is telling the story), international organizations had limitless work, conferences lasted weeks, and there weren’t enough interpreters to fill all the seats in the booth. You just had to be good at interpreting for word to get around, and the cream rose naturally to the top. Interpreters didn’t advertise – it wasn’t classy. Consultant and chief interpreters found out about you from word of mouth alone.

Today, all organizations are giving us less work at a time when training programs have multiplied: in Europe alone there are 17 producing just French A interpreters! Interpreters who want to make a living have to create new niches for themselves, having moved from working only for international organizations, to international trade associations, to the private market. We now work on the private market for individual businesses who want to sign contracts with counterparts from other countries; for arbitration procedures when things go wrong with these contracts; and, coming full circle, for international works councils when the businesses expand. Word of mouth still matters, but connections are made not only from working next to someone in the booth. The world has become more complex, and we as interpreters need to learn new skills.

Hope is not a strategy

Anyone who has studied economics in English has heard the phrase “There ain’t no such thing as a free lunch,” or its slightly less well known abbreviation TANSTAAFL. In this case, “free lunch” can be replaced with “magic bullet”. There are no easy, get-rich-quick schemes out there. There is no
special suit you should wear to get the job (though, depending on the country, the color of your tie may play a larger role than you think!); there is no special key word you can include on your website to get it to the top of search engine results; a large ad buy in social and traditional media will get your name out today, but without a lot of effort, will not get you any more work – at least not sustainably.

Among the hugely important hats that we interpreters need to wear – accountant, travel agent, bill collector, etc. – one that is only now being recognized by more interpreters is that of marketer. Too many of us hark back to those “old days” when advertising was the kiss of death because no member of a classy profession would sink so low, so you shouldn’t either. We still hope to rely on word of mouth alone.

**Getting the word out**

But really, marketing is just what we already do and always have done, simply in a much more systematic way. It is a way of getting the word out. In those “old days,” all we had to do was be good, and the word fell into the right ear. Today, we need to meet colleagues at conferences, give specialized training classes, and network. But since we now also have to create new niches for ourselves, our new clients are no longer only colleagues. And – again a new situation – when we meet these new prospective clients, they have no idea at all what it is we do, and why their nephew who spent his junior year abroad isn’t the perfect solution. So not only do we have to explain what we do, and educate people about our job, but we also have to convince them of the value of hiring us instead of letting things stumble along in “Globish” or “nephew-ish”.

Moreover, nowadays many things clamor for our – and our potential clients’ – attention. This means we need to be where they are, so they stumble across us without even having to look for us. We have to look familiar, by wearing what they expect us to wear; we have to sound familiar, by using their jargon; we have to present ourselves in a way they are used to; and we have to be present everywhere they are present: at industry conventions, at business gatherings, and on social media.

Being familiar doesn’t just mean going to one convention and handing out business cards. It means going to the same convention year after year, meeting the same people and building up a history: asking how their family is, checking in on how their projects are going, and generally becoming their familiar choice because, “oh yes, wasn’t that nice person I see at our annual convention an interpreter, and couldn’t s/he help us out on this new project?”

Social media can be a bit like this as well, though rather less costly in terms of tickets, hotel rooms, and so on. On the other hand, when done correctly, this type of marketing can be just as costly in terms of time. You cannot simply set up a LinkedIn or Facebook account, forget about it, and expect the work to roll in. You must keep the pages updated, increase your networks (and not only among colleagues), post articles, comment and “like” other people’s posts, and generally be present. You should say what people expect to hear, in ways they expect to hear it, while still explaining what makes you different – a daunting task, but not for language specialists! In other words, social media will help you to become the familiar choice without actually having to shake hands in person. But just as shaking hands in meetings and conventions isn’t all that gets you the job, being present on social media won’t be all that gets you the job either.

**Marketing, either through traditional means or social media, requires a strategy.** It requires mental elbow grease – you will have to sit down and spend time thinking about what you’ll do, for whom you want to do it, and how to get through to these prospective clients. It will mean that you come up with schedules for where and how you will be present, with whom to start conversations, and how to move forward in those exchanges. It is a long term, sustainable strategy, aimed at making you the familiar choice, and not a big spend on a large splash that then sinks to the bottom of
the sea, forgotten.

And while it takes work and time to build up familiarity, once you are there you will be the preferred choice in your niche. So maybe the magic bullet does exist – it’s called a good marketing strategy!

Other chapters

- The business of interpreting: FAQ 2 - What is the cornerstone of a marketing plan?
- The business of interpreting: FAQ 3 – Who is my client?
- The business of interpreting: FAQ 4 – What exactly am I selling?
- The business of interpreting: FAQ 5 – Why do I need to be a brand?

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