Our work requires trust and a little respect

Interpreting is a profession, not a commodity. It’s about communication and relies on collaboration and mutual respect.

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In this era of high speed communications and world trade the function of the interpreter is of unquestionable importance. There cannot be a globalized society without mutual understanding, and all efforts to understand other cultures begin with the transmission of a proposal or an idea by means of the language they speak.

The interpreter is defined as a person who converts a thought or expression in a source language into an expression with a comparable meaning in a target language, conveying all semantic elements as well as the tone and register, and every intention and feeling of the message that the source language speaker is directing to the target language recipients. Basically, it is the action of transmitting ideas between two groups of people who are physically (or virtually) present, but do not understand one half of what is being said in the room.

The question that immediately comes to mind is: Why do these individuals, who have something important to communicate to the other group, believe the conveyed information and base their decisions on what the interpreter says in their native language? What on earth makes them believe what the interpreter utters, especially in the many instances when they had never seen this person before? In fact, when the interpreting is from a booth, the recipients of the interpreting services never get to see the interpreter. The answer is complex, but it is also very simple: Because they trust the interpreter.

During their life, most humans will have many experiences with providers of goods and services. They will make decisions, some big and others small, based on their expectations as to the quality of those goods and services. In some cases, because of the nature of the service and the characteristics of those who deliver it, they will select the provider based on trust. This is what happens when a person hires a physician, a lawyer or an architect. We put our lives in the hands of surgeons and airplane pilots because we trust that they will perform as expected. We trust that a civil engineer will build us a house that is safe for our family. We trust that an accountant will take care of our fiscal obligations according to the law. We trust these individuals and their services because they practice a profession. They are professionals who have studied and demonstrated that they can deliver the service, perform the task.

On the other hand, we pick individuals or businesses for other services, or to get some goods, based on an expected result. That is why when we go to a restaurant we hope that the food is as good as we heard it was, or when we go to the store we hope that the clothes we are going to purchase will fit, last, be comfortable. We select the providers of these goods and services expecting a desired result: A fast car, an honest housekeeper, and so on. These goods and services are commercial, they do not
fall in the category of professional occupations. People can join these industries and with skill and perseverance, not necessarily with a formal education or a scientific skill, get to the top of their trade. A very capable individual can become the best laborer in any given industry. Of course there has to be some trust for these businesses to succeed, but this is in the realm of “trust but verify”. That is why we are not shocked when we see a homeowner by the side of the technician throughout the time he is at the house fixing the refrigerator, but we would never even think of joining the surgeon by the operating table while he performs a liver transplant. The second activity is a professional service and it requires absolute trust.

Interpreters fall into this category. **We are professionals providing a sophisticated, complex, and unique professional service.** Like the airplane pilot, we are trusted professionals and people trust us to the point of letting us be the source of all information and exchanges when dealing with someone who speaks a language they do not understand.

I have always believed this to be one of the most important characteristics of our craft. Ours is one of very few fiduciary occupations. It is for this reason that I reacted the way I did when I recently faced a situation where these essential characteristics of our profession were questioned.

I consider myself very fortunate because after many years of hard work, I have developed a portfolio of very good clients who value my work and show it in the way they treat me and remunerate my services. It is not very common for me to accept an assignment from an unknown source, but sometimes, because the gig seems interesting or because I have nothing better to do, I do accept one (provided that my minimum requirements are met).

Not long ago, I was sitting at my desk working on the blog when I received an email for an assignment that looked interesting. It got my attention, so I checked my schedule to see if I was open on the date of the event and I was. I must say that the email came from a well-known agency, but with the exception of a job here and there many years ago, I had never really collaborated with them on an assignment.

I responded to the email providing the information they requested: My willingness to take the assignment, my availability on that date, and my fee. The person from the agency got back to me very quickly to let me know that it all looked great, but they would need me to go lower on my fee. I immediately answered with a resounding: No!

At that point, I thought that this was the end of the story, that just like so many other times in the past they were going to give me the silent treatment.

To my surprise, the agency contacted me again on the following morning. This time it was a different person, a supervisor I was told, who wrote to me and stated that she had googled me, that they had asked around, and that after their research, they had agreed to my fee, and if I was interested, they would love to have me as part of their team for the assignment. I said that I would do it, but that I needed to discuss payment terms with them before going any further. I explained that I have an invoice system that I use, and that I needed them to honor my invoice like the rest of my clients. It was explained to me that the company’s policy was to use their own payment system and invoice forms. I again emphasized the fact that I would only take the job if they agreed to a simple invoice by email with no other hurdles. I explained that I sell my time and the hours or minutes I was going to spend working on their forms would not be paid by anybody. The agency representative answered that my conditions were acceptable, and all I had to do was to email them an invoice after the assignment. I agreed and that was the end of the negotiations, which by the way, I have in writing.

Several weeks went by until one day I received an email with the materials for the assignment. Everything was fine to that point, but as I kept on reading until the end of the message, I discovered
that they had sent me some forms to fill out, indicating the time I started and finished interpreting. On top of that, they requested that I call the agency at the moment I arrive at the venue, and that their client’s representative sign the form “certifying” that the assignment had indeed started and ended at the times written by me on their form.

I had never been asked to do anything like this before. I felt insulted and got very upset. They were checking on me, just like they would on the Maytag Man, to make sure I had worked, and my word was not good enough for these folks; they needed me to prove that I was at the event, so they told me to call them. And my credibility was so poor that they needed another individual to vouch for me.

I took a deep breath, actually I took several, and afterwards I thought of the absurdity of this policy. It was clear to me that they had this rule in place because they did not trust me, and did not trust any of my colleagues. The thing I could not understand is: If they have their doubts about the time I show up for the assignment and about whether or not I actually rendered an interpretation, how is it possible that they let me interpret from a foreign language that nobody in the room understands but me and my booth mate. They got it all backwards. I felt disrespected by this “interpreting” agency, and I felt that they had insulted my profession.

After a few minutes I wrote them back, indicating that I was not used to being under surveillance by anybody, that I was a professional who sells his time, skill, and knowledge by providing a professional service, and that I have always expected to be treated with decency, respect, and as a professional. I added that I could not agree to their corporate policy, and for that reason I was declining the assignment. It was not long before the person from the agency wrote back, and her email was very telling. It read as follows: “...We regret that (you have) declined the assignment. We agreed to pay you above our usual rate, but unfortunately, we cannot waive the other requirements. This is our policy and it is very similar to that of many others in the industry...”

That is the problem, dear friends and colleagues, these agencies expect to deal with us as merchants, not professionals. Key terms such as “rates” (like a merchant) instead of “fees” (like a professional), give us an idea of who they are looking for in the “industry”. To take one of the words this agency used on their final email: “Unfortunately” interpreting is not an industry, it is a profession. We cannot work under mistrust nor for a client (who they would probably call “customer”) who comes to our environment with the same hopes and expectations that you have when you enter the dry cleaners. I deal with clients who trust me to do my work just like I trust the dentist who drills holes in my teeth. We are a profession. Industries deal with their service providers as laborers. I will stick to those businesses who deal with me as a professional. I now invite you to share your comments or similar experiences when an agency or a direct client has viewed you as a factory worker and not as a professional.

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This article was previously published on Mr. Rosado’s blog The Professional Interpreter.

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