Have you ever noticed that when you do something with a specific goal in mind, you do it much better than when you “just do it”? I have noticed that when I practice a skill, or attend an event, or research an upcoming job, I get much more out of it when I have a goal in mind than when I simply practice, go to the event, or do the research. Attention is a very powerful tool; having a goal focuses your attention and lets you move forward farther and faster than you could have otherwise.

In the good old days we all hear about, back when there weren’t enough interpreters for all the work that was on offer, you could usually just get your name out there, and the work would come in. So what if last week you were a lawyer, this week you are an urban planner, and next week you could be an astrophysicist? Jobs were plentiful and lasted several days at a time, so any research paid off. You had work and you were in demand.

Where’s your focus?

Today, the world has changed. In the past we all had feast or famine cycles in our business year; nowadays it seems one person may be in a perpetual feast cycle while another is in perpetual famine. There are so many different situations that need interpreting, and they are limited only by your various skills, languages, location, ambitions, etc. Paradoxically, it is not those who will take anything, in any market, for any rate, who are on the feast side of the equation. Those who have a specific goal in mind, the focused few who have thought about the answers to a few questions before they start to work, will have a longer and more sustainable career.

“Thinking? But what questions do I have to think about? I am an interpreter, so I interpret! The only research I need to do now is for future jobs!”

This is something I hear from students all the time, but also from some experienced colleagues, many of whom are starting to see less work come their way thanks to these uncertain times.

Of course, there are the more basic questions – that some of us have already answered, but many don’t even bother asking – things such as “with my language combination, where should I live to get the most work?” To illustrate, many young interpreters tend to stay in the same place where they received their interpreting degree. This is not always a bad idea, as their teachers have contacts that could give them work locally – but what about interpreters who would have had a much more lucrative market elsewhere and never did the research?
A second question that might arise is “what field would I like to specialize in?” Again, those of us who started interpreting in a boom market just took whatever came along. We were dilettantes in many fields, though the more polite would have called us universalists, and we still have to be. But did you notice that you tend to do more work in one or two specific fields than in others? You could consolidate your research to become even more of an expert, network in that world, and then you really do have something you specialize in.

Then there are questions such as “what types of interpreting services do I offer?” If we have graduated from a good conference interpreting school, then it is obvious that we offer consecutive and simultaneous interpretation, with a bit of whispering thrown in for good measure. But what about using portable equipment without a booth, more commonly known in Europe as “bidule”? It takes a different skill and attitude, so you would have to decide if you are able, and willing to do so. And what about remote interpreting? Video feeds into conferences have become commonplace, but what about doing the entire conference from a centralized place – or even from home – over the internet? And what about doing interpretation over the telephone? In what circumstances? Under what conditions? You cannot stop proceedings because suddenly, from out of the blue, something not in your negotiated contract is thrown into the mix, unless you have thought about all the possibilities ahead of time and know what your arguments for and against will be.

'What' comes after 'why'?

When we move into the marketing side of our work, there are other questions to ask, such as “what am I selling” and “who is my client”, which I will discuss more in detail in future posts. But there is one question so important that it needs bringing up as soon as possible, even earlier than understanding what skills you have, or where to find work. A question that is the cornerstone of everything in your life, your career, your marketing, and will even help determine how much you can eventually make. In fact, it is so important that you must have seen books or TED Talks on the topic. But few of us have ever really thought in detail about "Why?" Or in our case, “Why am I an interpreter?”

If you have watched the Simon Sinek talk on TED with millions of views – "Start With Why" – you have already heard of a few examples from outside our field.

The example most applicable to us concerns computers: an ordinary computer company says, "we make great computers, they are easy to use, do you want to buy one?" – pretty much turning their computer into a commodity. Personally, when I buy a new computer, I decide on my basic requirements, and then buy the cheapest one that does what I want. Does that sound like what your prospects are doing when they look for interpreting services?

Now, Apple turns this approach on its head and works in the other direction. They have figured out their "why" first. According to Mr. Sinek, their "why" is "we believe in challenging the status quo in everything we do," which leads to "how" – "by making our products beautifully designed, simple to use, and user friendly." Very incidentally, their "what" is they "make really great computers," with huge numbers of devotees all over the world who stand in line for hours at the launch of the next product and would never even think about owning a PC; all this despite the price, the closed-loop architecture, and the incompatibility with so many other useful programs and devices out there.

Most of us tend to do what all the run-of-the mill computer companies do and start with our "what" – we deliver interpreting services; moving to "how" – in a simultaneous interpreting booth, incorporating some sort of USP; but we all tend to neglect our "why." Is it any wonder, when so many of us use this model to sell our services, that we are treated like a commodity by our clients?

So why are you an interpreter? Is it because you love languages? Travel? Prestige? Are you inspired by a challenge? Are you fascinated by international relations? Do you love to help people
communicate? Do you want to participate in events that will change the world? Do you want to change the world yourself?

Some of these motivations can be satisfied only outside the interpreting profession – if you want your own prestige or to change the world yourself, you should become a politician, an activist, a diplomat, but not an interpreter. You will be dissatisfied with your work and your life, and will always criticize those you are interpreting. Get out there and make the speeches, rather than interpreting them!

And some of these motivations can be satisfied outside or inside the interpreting profession – for example, if you love languages, or you like to travel, you could do many different things that would align with that love (and might bring a more stable income!): work in the travel industry, teach languages, work in a multinational company, work as a diplomat. Salaries are more predictable, and you would still be feeding your central love and what brings you happiness and fulfilment.

Another example would be the person who loves a challenge. This also can be satisfied outside the profession: you could go into the military, get a degree in advanced mathematics, start your own business... And if you love helping people communicate, then you could go into teaching, public relations, media, marketing…

But, to satisfy these motivations inside the profession, if you have become an interpreter because you love languages, you can focus on that part of what you offer. I know interpreters who read dictionaries like others read mystery books; beautiful language makes them happy. Well-written books, where they can bathe in creative and elegant expression, are their favorite gifts. They incorporate beautiful and elegant phrases into their interpretation, and know the origin of each one. Be the interpreter who focuses on the beauty of the language – you will be sought after when precision and elegance are what your client wants.

Or once you understand that you became an interpreter because of your love for a challenge, find out what kind of challenge inspires you and focus on that. Maybe you like the challenge of interpreting high level speeches on television. Maybe your challenge will be to make a difficult foreign language into your B, even if you have no family connections in that country. Be the interpreter who is unafraid when the going gets tough or the job is unusual, and you will be the person everyone turns to when other interpreters are too frightened.

Finally, if you became an interpreter because you love to communicate, and to help others communicate their ideas, then make sure to communicate to your client that you will be the best solution to get their ideas across to their audience. Be the interpreter who is so good at interpreting discussions, negotiations or arguments that both sides think you have bought into the other side’s point of view – then communicate to them that this is exactly how well you are putting their arguments across to the counterparts, and you will be the interpreter people go to when they have ideas to transmit.

And “why” also helps you figure out if you want to work with a client or not. I know, turning away business is a novel idea, but do you really want to work for someone who values you and your input so little that they never stop trying to find a cheaper solution, treat you badly, and overwork you? Or would you rather work for someone who shares your values, who understands what you bring to their project, who will recommend you to their peers, and whose work you so believe in that you are happy to help them?

“Why” is a very powerful idea, and a question that definitely should be answered by all of us, no matter where we are in our career. Communicate your difference, your “why”, to your client, and you will have convinced them that you aren’t just a commodity, like those cheap computers, but that you are unique and that you add value.
Other chapters

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