The business of interpreting: FAQ 3 – Who is my client?

Defining your abilities and priorities can lead to identifying niche markets that will expand your client base. It’s never all or nothing!

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When we receive our degree, we all assume that now it’s only a matter of delivering our services. But very quickly we come up against the reality that work doesn’t fall from the heavens and we must think more strategically about our careers.

In FAQ 2 I noted some simple questions that are the basis of strategic thinking: “Where should I live?” “What field should I specialize in?” “What services do I offer?”, and the big one, “Why do I interpret?” But there are more questions down the career road and this article examines one of them: Who exactly is my client?

I can hear you asking “What do you mean, who is my client? Isn’t it obvious? It’s whoever pays me!” But this is far too simplistic an answer for so important a topic.

The forgotten client

First of all, your most obvious – but often forgotten – client is your colleague. Your partner in the booth is not only a fellow interpreter but may also have hired you for the job.

Colleagues are our best clients: they know exactly what we do, and best of all – they know the customers, so we don’t have to find them ourselves! They act as the middleman, organizing the meeting, making sure we get documents, and letting us know how we will get paid.

So why do so many of us treat our colleagues differently than we treat a chief interpreter or a business client? A colleague knows you better and may even be a friend, but this does not mean that they should be treated less professionally than a chief interpreter.

When your colleague calls, do you answer right away? When they ask you for information, do you reply immediately or do you forget, making them contact you again? When the job is over, is it your invoice the colleague is still waiting for to get everybody paid?

If we all made sure to treat our colleagues as potential clients all of the time, we would never forget to treat them as clients when they do hire us – which they might do more often if we treated them more professionally. A virtuous circle!

Who else?
“My client is whoever pays me” doesn’t work when it’s not a colleague either. Would you take any job at all? Would you work in a bar, interpreting for someone trying to get a “date”? When exactly would that job end? (Ewww.) And you would probably be paid in beer. This is exactly what a translation app is for. Plus, the app doesn’t get humiliated transposing bad pickup lines from one language to another.

Inventory yourself

You have to focus on your niche market to understand who your client is. The first step is to inventory yourself: your education, skills, likes and dislikes, hobbies and causes, what makes you tick.


What else do you know from **life experience**? For example, I have never studied medicine, but since several members of my family are diabetic, I need very little preparation to discuss diabetes, its causes, repercussions and treatment. Maybe you love Tom Clancy books – then you will know about the technical workings of submarines. Are you interested in fashion? Beauty products? Cars? Motivational speakers? These are all fields that use interpreters.

What about **other skills**? Are you a good cook? Can you make amazing gluten- and dairy-free chocolate confections? Are you a fan of musicals? Do you tango or salsa? Are you a great organizer? These can also be added to your inventory.

And don’t forget the valuable work we did determining **why you interpret.** This can help you understand if a potential client’s values match yours. You may think, “Well, they are paying me, so I don’t much care if our values align.” A valid point – but it is so much easier to sell your services if you really believe in what the client is doing and what you can bring to them.

Your market

Now it’s time to understand your interpreting market. With your language combination and education, what type of market can you target? Is this the market that you would ultimately like to be working in?

There are so many different places interpretation is needed: on the private market, for contract and business negotiations, sales conferences, information exchanges, seminars…; in the public service market, interpreting in hospitals, for insurance companies, in schools; in the legal market, for court cases, depositions, consultations, medical and mental health interviews; in the conference interpreting market, for international conferences, special courts, international organizations. Your possibilities are limited only by your imagination and abilities.

Now that you understand this, you realize that you cannot be all things to all markets, so it makes sense to focus on the market that will be most aligned with you.

Your Ideal Client

So who might work in your favorite place, field and market, using your favorite skills? This is where you develop your “ideal client avatar,” the description of the person you most want to work for. Of
course, you will continue to work for the same people who have been hiring you already – but this focuses your attention on the clients you ultimately want.

When you make an ideal client avatar, you describe this person in great detail. The more specific you are, the easier it is to recognize your ideal client when you find him or her.

- Approximately how old is your ideal client?
- Male or female?
- Married or single?
- Would s/he live in the city in a house or an apartment, or in the country?
- What kind of an education would s/he have received?
- What type of company does s/he work for?
- How much does the company earn?
- In what position does your client work, and how much does s/he earn? What hobbies, interests, causes, does s/he espouse?
- What magazines, books, music, TV series, films, podcasts, blogs, social media sites does s/he like?
- What kind of car does s/he drive?
- What kind of clothes does s/he wear – designer, off the rack, what brands, what style?
- Where does s/he like to eat, what cuisine, what does s/he like to drink?
- What are the luxuries s/he can’t live without?
- What will s/he want to buy from you?
- And most important, what is the problem s/he has that you can solve?

For example, if you (1) have an MA in conference interpreting English and French, and a PhD in literature; (2) have always been very interested in cars – so much so that you worked for a stint as a mechanic when you were younger, and (3) keep up with all the car magazines, new car models, etc. For fun.

Your ideal client could be:

- The head of PR for a large car company with international product launches,
- who makes a very good salary,
- reads car magazines,
- watched Top Gear religiously (while Jeremy Clarkson was the host),
- uses metaphors and colorful images,
- and sells to overseas clients.

In this scenario, you should go to car companies, contact the PR Department, and show your specialized knowledge.

Or perhaps you (1) have been working as an interpreter and translator for years with Russian and English; (2) your university education was in policy-making with a concentration in the environment; (3) you like designer fashion and good food; (4) you like the prestige of working with important people, and (5) you are a good organizer.

Your ideal client avatar may just be:

- A Russian oligarch,
- currently living in a house in London,
- eating in expensive but conservative restaurants,
- spending his money traveling to visit politicians and media heads,
- doing good in environmental remediation,
- and getting his point of view about the current government in Russia out to the West.
In this case, you would actively find out who works on your avatar’s scheduling, see if you can get yourself in the mix as an interpreter, and try to make yourself indispensable, knowing all there is to know about environmental remediation, Russian politics, organizing, and policy-making.

None of the above means that you turn down work in other areas, or stop treating colleagues like clients. But it does mean that you will focus your marketing into more of a *niche field*, niche meaning less commoditization of your services, less competition, and more fulfilling relationships.

Now, all you need is to **understand what you are selling**, the topic of our next FAQ.

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**Other chapters**

- The business of interpreting: FAQ 1 – How can I get more work?
- The business of interpreting: FAQ 2 - What is the cornerstone of a marketing plan?
- 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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