

How to sell at translation conferences

There is a debate between managers and sales specialists at translation agencies: Are translation and localization conferences worth the money you invest in them? There is a very wide range of responses — from “That’s where all my clients come from” to “They’re a pointless waste of money”. Why are opinions so varied and how do you make sales anyway?

Relax and take it easy

You can’t go to a conference like you’re going to war, even if it’s full of your competitors (and it really will be full of them). The mindset “I came, I saw, I conquered” is only good for war. Only the first two parts work for conferences — “I came, I saw”. The “I conquered” part doesn’t work.

A soldier’s grim facial expression and stare will be off-putting to the people you speak to; you’ll come across as sullen and arrogant. People will keep out of your way, and that’s going to stop you building business contacts. In other words, if you see the conference as a field of battle you will singlehandedly undo your own purpose for being there.

Conclusion: Just take it easy, be warm and affable.

Don’t pounce on people

Your agency is not a charity, and you want to sell your services, obviously. However, if you start pouncing on everyone you meet right off the bat, saying “We’re the team of your dreams — work with us and only us!” they’ll politely tell you: “We don’t work in your language” or “We’re very happy with our current provider”. **Extreme assertiveness will just make people want to avoid you**, and the rest will remember you as “that psycho that has something to sell to everyone”.

In other words, the effect you get isn’t even neutral, it’s negative. People have no reason to trust you yet and you already want their money. You can’t do that — to start off with, you have to win the trust of the potential client, or at least get them to like you, and only then can you offer them your services.

Build relationships

People buy from people. This axiom works in the translation and localization industry, too. The translation market has been growing for a number of years now, and yet it is still quite small; trust and reputation mean more here than contracts and formalities.

If your interaction with a potential partner is limited to a chance five-minute conversation in a coffee break or the standard exchange of business cards, then by the time they get back to their office they probably won’t even remember you. At conferences, everyone takes part in dozens of these little chats, and their conversation with you just isn’t going to stick in their memory. In a week, your card will have turned into some mysterious artifact to them (and this, by the way, is why **you absolutely have to include your own photo on your business card** — this will help them identify who you are).

If you’ve had a long chat about issues that matter to you both, that’s different. And this might be about business or it might be unrelated, but something that the other party is interested in, anyway. Normally, these chats take place in unofficial parts of the conference — when you’re walking around the city, at gala dinners or sitting in the bar. In that informal atmosphere, talk of industry trends switches easily to sharing family photos, conversations about football, fashion, travel and so on.

These unrelated conversations are better at facilitating new business relationships than showing price lists and making out forms. And there’s nothing odd about this. Any anthropologist will tell you that we lived within the family circle for seventy thousand years, and depended on that community, and it is only in the last hundred years or so that we have turned into individualists. But there’s no substitute for instinct — **before we can work together, we must gain each other’s trust** and find common ground.

Don't be thinking about return on investment as soon as you get there

Anything you do in business should have a quantifiable result. Without that, it's impossible to manage or plan effectively. To many managers this logic is self-evident. And barely have they returned from a conference but they immediately work out their ROI ratio — the return on their investment in the conference — according to a simplistic formula: comparing the money they have spent on the trip against the profit gained through jobs from new clients. And they are deeply disappointed...

And there's more: not only does every individual conference not pay for itself — it is extremely unprofitable. There is the temptation to view this "negative profit" as a direct loss. For example, with a 20% margin, every €1,000 spent on a trip needs to bring a €5,000 return in order that it pays for itself. But should that be the formula for our calculation?

Firstly, to what period of time should you limit the sales effect from one conference? If the client you found there gives you jobs over the course of the next ten years, how can you calculate the return on investment after one year?

Secondly, sales theory says that a sale requires eight "touches" for a lead. In other words, the effect has to be reinforced, which means attending more conferences. But this only confuses the calculation more: it's hard to work out what effect every individual conference has, and at which of these eight stages each lead is at any given moment.

In this sense, it is quite a challenge to get a more or less objective picture of things. You will only get figures even remotely close to the reality by attending several conferences over the course of at least three years. It's an expensive experiment, but there's no other way.

In the short term, the profitability of your translation agency is likely to see a noticeable decline. A simple calculation will show that by not going to conferences, arithmetically you will save more than you would earn. But this kind of economical behavior means stagnating at your present level and not evolving.

It is important to understand that **selling at conferences is a long game**. You'll barely manage to sell anything at your first conferences. But it's something else you need them for — to show you're not some smalltime player in the translation market, that you're in it for the long haul.

The aim of your first trips is to set some business connections in motion, make yourself some friends and create a pool of them for the future. The serious sales will start later on — when you have an extensive network of contacts. Building that will take you several years.

With the right approach, over time people will start recognizing and recommending you. This will simplify and speed up sales, because clients will start coming to you themselves, without you putting in any work at all, on someone else's recommendation (you won't always know whose).

Word and deed

Relationships between people are not static — they evolve and change. For the sake of argument, we can point to these distinct periods: first impressions, getting involved, the romantic period, then the "serious" stage. Relationships between companies evolve on the same principle.

It is important to understand that to impress a potential client at a conference, or make friends with them after a heart-to-heart at the bar, is only half the battle. **Once you've won their trust, you have to prove that you're good enough for them**. And you have to keep on proving that.

With that first job, a new player enters into the sale, on whose actions your future relationship with the client entirely depends — whether they send you jobs in future; how they describe you to other people; whether they'll even want to say hello to you at the next conference. That player is the project manager.

Without a decent production department, without quality control and a reliable team of project managers, all your efforts to find new clients will be in vain. One-off jobs will not provide a return on your investment. Your task is to ensure that partnership becomes a longterm thing and nourishes you for many years to come. This will only be possible for as long as the client is happy with the quality of your work and has a reason to recommend you to other people.

It is only when you fulfill all these conditions that **attending conferences becomes profitable — after a few years**.

Conclusion

So showing up just once at a conference or exhibition isn't enough — you have to work hard to earn your partners' trust. It is a long and costly process. It will only pay off if your company really is capable of providing the quality of services that will satisfy your customers.

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