



# Marketing 101 for Translation Companies

*By Grant Hamilton*

**We, as language** services providers, may believe that special marketing rules apply to us. For example, we may think we are different because we have to spend a lot of time educating our clients. (Has a restaurant ever had to explain the value of eating, or the value of having an actual chef cook the food instead of a machine?) It is also much harder for us to target our efforts. We cannot just take out an ad in *Translation Buyer's Monthly*, because no such publication exists. So yes, some general things that people do to market their businesses—advertise on the radio, hold after-Christmas sales, sponsor a junior league baseball team, include an insert in the local paper—may not make sense for language services providers.

But this is not to say we are completely different, that we exist in some

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kind of parallel marketing world. The basics of marketing apply to us, and we disregard them at our peril. Let's have a look at a few marketing tactics.

## **Reach Out and Touch Someone**

Every time we talk to or write to a client, we have an opportunity to market ourselves. You may be thinking, "Of course I know that," but do you truly

pay attention to it? These "touch points" can make or break a relationship.

I once had a client tell me that she loved calling our office. "Everyone seems so glad to hear from me," she explained. We were a small office at the time, so perhaps it was easier to develop close, personal relationships. But her comment raises a question for us all: Do people feel welcome when they call?

Making people feel welcome should be an obsession. The person who answers the phone must not only sound friendly, but actually *be* friendly. How does your phone get answered? If it is with a recorded message, ask yourself this: Is the productivity you gain really worth the personal touch you lose when there is no live person on the other end? If I were calling you as an eager, first-time client, I would want to speak to somebody directly, if for no other reason than to be told what a smart decision I had made to call you and how happy the person in charge will be to call me back. Worse than a recorded message, however, is getting a recorded message at 3:00 in the afternoon telling me that business hours are from 9:00 to 5:00. If that is so, pick up the phone!

Which brings me to another issue: Have you ever stopped to consider what your recorded message says about you as a professional? Try calling your office tonight and listening to the message. Is it pleasant? Is it easy to navigate the menu options? Do people have a choice of language? (Now that would be a nice touch, as a translation company and all!)

### **Mind Your Grammar**

Most people, however, do not actually call. They e-mail. And if your office is anything like our office, you e-mail them back, and never a spoken word is heard.

I once stopped by an employee's desk and noticed he was in the midst of e-mailing a client. This in itself was normal. But I did a double-take when I saw his message: there was not a single capital letter in it. It looked like he was texting a buddy about after-work drinks, not forwarding a translation to a client.

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## **It is much easier to win new business from existing clients than to find new clients.**

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Call me crazy, but I think knowing how to use capital letters is one of the services we sell. We also sell proper spelling, punctuation, grammar, style, terminology, and more. Why not showcase it?

In our busy office, many people deliver work to clients. We sometimes send off 30 jobs or more a day. Therefore, we have an e-mail policy that reads as follows:

“In your e-mail communications with clients, always write as if you were composing a letter. Include a greeting (Dear Mr. Jones:), say what attachments you have included (Please find attached the translation you requested for 10:00 this morning), tell them whom to contact if they have questions (usually you), and thank them for their business. And if you are late, apologize.”

Once you have composed your friendly, businesslike e-mail, reread it for typos, misspellings, etc. If you struggle with written English, have someone else reread it, too. You may not be the translator, but your clients will judge the quality of your translations by the quality of your writing. If every e-mail is full of mistakes, it sends the wrong message about you.

### **Make It Easy to Contact You**

At our firm we do not have fancy e-mail signatures, but we pack them full of valuable information: mailing address, phone numbers (four in all, including one for overseas), fax number, e-mail address for new work or

inquiries, website, and Twitter feed with a short explanation of what we tweet.

E-mail signatures are also great marketing tools for other purposes. Back in the days before Web 2.0, we had a monthly e-newsletter about language that we sent only to people who requested it. We publicized it with a short line at the bottom of every e-mail. In about two years, we collected some 1,500 subscribers using no other means of promotion.

We also use our e-mail signature to reinforce the notion that we are a team. We have in-house translators who work from French into English, and others who work from English into French, so we list their names in every e-mail signature. This adds a personal touch and conveys the message that translators work in only one direction.

I bet you can think of something important to say to your clients in your e-mail signature. It could be something as simple as your president's name together with an invitation to contact him or her directly if there is a problem.

### **Establish a Personal Connection**

If people have a choice between two translators, they will probably pick the one they know—so make sure people know you.

Is it feasible to pay a visit to your clients? If so, do it. At our company, our client base is clustered in two major cities, making it convenient to stop in and say hello. I do this every December, to convey our best wishes for the holiday and personally thank our clients for their business. It takes me six days, but it is worth every ➡

second. For added effect, I come bearing boxes of chocolates molded in the shape of our logo. This has created what we fondly call the “chocolate effect”—a sudden rush of new orders just prior to Christmas.

People appreciate and remember the fact that the company president made time for them. It creates a personal connection that pays dividends in loyalty and communication. And if ever they are disappointed with our work, they call me instead of defecting to a competitor.

There are other ways you can be visible. For instance, if your clients are chiefly other translation agencies, you can—and must—attend industry events. That means, for example, every ATA Annual Conference and every Translation Company Division mid-year event. I know that I am much more willing to entrust work to people I have personally met than to a faceless e-contact.

### Play Up Your Local Advantage

Your clients may be all over the world, but you have a “home court” advantage in your hometown that can boost your visibility.

Become a member of your local chamber of commerce. Attend events. Suggest yourself as a luncheon speaker. (How about offering to speak on globalization or how to reduce translation costs?) Is there a German or Italian or some such chamber of commerce in your area? Join it, too. It is a great way to meet people who work in multilingual environments.

Get involved in fields outside translation. As I was writing this, I was contacted by a local radio station to do an interview about “passionate” people. Why? Because tonight I am giving a talk on art collecting at a local museum. It has nothing to do with translation, but it has created an

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opportunity for more people to know about me and my business.

If you are a can-do kind of person, think about doing something high profile, like organizing a fundraiser for your local hospital or chairing the board of directors for an important event or cause. I guarantee it will help your business.

### Do Some Direct Marketing

By direct marketing, I do not mean sending a letter to every business in town extolling your services, which is probably a waste of time. I mean micro-targeting individual people.

At our company we get 40% of our business from advertising agencies, so we keep tabs on what they are doing. If somebody wins an award, we write them a letter to congratulate them. If someone gets appointed to an important new position (or even a not-so-important position), we also send a word of congratulations. An actual letter in an actual envelope with a stamp on it. The impact is amazing.

We also stay abreast of trade associations. When new members join their boards, we write them to commend them on their community spirit. I bumped into one such person the other day who had recently received a letter from us on her appointment as president of the local marketing communications association. She was biking with a friend and actually stopped to say thank you. Then she turned to her companion and asked him if he knew me, saying “If you

don’t you should, because you’ll probably be needing his services some day.” Talk about a payoff!

To whom should you be writing? Make a list today and start now.

### Deliver the News

It is much easier to win new business from existing clients than to find new clients. Take this fact to heart and promote yourselves relentlessly to existing clients. If you have positive news to announce, do it. Write a press release and e-mail it to your clients. Tell them about the Fortune 500 business that has just entrusted you with its translations. Announce a charitable event with which your company is associated. Publicize awards you or your employees have won. Introduce new staff members. Better yet, include the local media on your distribution list and you may also get press coverage. For example, we used the arrival of a new Russian-speaking employee to vaunt the linguistic talents of our other staff members in German, Portuguese, Spanish, and Polish. This brought immediate business our way in languages other than English and French, our main area of specialty.

### Fight Website Boredom

Have you ever spent time browsing translation company websites? Ever get the impression they all say the same thing? I know I do.

Admittedly, it is hard to stand out when we all sell the same thing, but

## Is Your Marketing Up to Snuff? Ask Yourself These Key Questions.

1. Do people feel welcome when they call your office?
2. How does your phone get answered? The person who answers the phone must not only sound friendly, but actually be friendly.
3. Is the productivity you gain by having a recorded message really worth the personal touch you lose when there is no live person on the other end of the phone?
4. What does your recorded office message say about you as a professional?
5. In written communication, if every e-mail is full of mistakes, what sort of message does that send to the client?
6. E-mail signatures are great marketing tools. How can you use your e-mail signature to impart important facts about your services to contacts?
7. Is it feasible to pay a visit to your clients? If so, do it. People appreciate and remember the fact that you made time for them.
8. How can you get involved with your local community? Participating in community events is an opportunity for more people to know about you and your business.

you should at least try. I admire websites that offer interesting insights or features, like a fun-to-read blog (no, I do not have one, but I am working on it!), a useful Twitter feed, helpful links, or good resources I can download and enjoy. I was quite impressed once to come across a site that had most of these, plus a chat button for immediate assistance. “Great idea” I thought, “we should do that!” So I clicked “chat” to congratulate them on their great website, and got a message saying no one was available. Good concept, poor execution.

The thing I am told repeatedly about our old and sorely-in-need-of-an-update website is what a friendly place our company appears to be. That is because we use our website to showcase our employees. It is a cliché, but they are our best asset and

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the best reason for doing business with us. Why should I hide them behind a lot of industry jargon?

Another comment I get is how well written our website is, in English and French. This is something worth obsessing over. I nearly choked recently in overhearing two company owners discuss adding a GoogleTranslate tool to their websites to make them multilingual. Believe me, you need to translate it yourself, using real humans.

### Pay Attention to the Little Stuff

In the end, marketing is not just flashy websites. It is the sum total of everything you do. It is how fast you answer client inquiries. How friendly you are. How generous you are with your time and energy. It is your whole approach and philosophy, your commitment to excellence at every client touch point, from first contact to final invoice. Mind the little stuff, and big success will follow.