



Guide to

Selecting the Best Translation Options For Your Business

There are various options for translating your content, and all of them are possible in Smartling. How do you make the best choice for your business? Here's an overview of the most popular translation options.

Professional Human Translation



Benefits and Uses

This option offers the highest possible quality. Quality content is critical for both SEO and customer satisfaction, which is why this is typically the best option for translation. Costs are generally based on the target language and priced by the word, making them fairly predictable. Professional human translation is absolutely essential for specialized or technical content.

Risks

This option takes a little more time, but it's necessary to ensure quality. Professional human translation is not always possible for high-speed, high-volume projects – for example, millions of words of user-generated content are not typically translated using this method, since the users continue creating content faster than it is possible to deliver translations with this option. Quality is dependent on the vendor chosen, as skills vary by translator and agency, making it extremely important that you select a trusted translation provider.

Guidance

For nearly all business needs, professional human translation is by far the best choice and represents the lowest risk. The vast majority of Smartling customers choose this option. Levels of quality vary. For example, a triple-pass process, with a translator, an editor, and a proofreader or reviewer, requires three separate people to perform and check or revise the translation. A double-pass process is more common since it takes less time, and usually provides good results. Quality depends on the vendor and the process used, so it's important to know which questions to ask when evaluating potential translation providers.

Transcreation by Human Professionals

Benefits and Uses

This option is used primarily for marketing taglines, in-language SEO keyword creation, and creative content that has no direct equivalent in the target language. For example, a tagline of “at lightning speed” might not make sense in a language where the phrase “lightning speed” does not exist. Instead, an equivalent phrase would need to be developed from scratch. Transcreation specialists do not work from a source text, but rather from a creative brief, much like copywriters or designers. Usually, transcreation projects also require professional human translation for the majority of the content, with transcreation used just for taglines, headers, and other more creative content.

Risks

This option uses creative marketing talent, so it has the highest cost (billed hourly instead of per word). It cannot be done at scale or very quickly. As with all types of translation, quality depends on the vendor chosen. “Back-translation,” or reverse translation, is recommended so that your business knows exactly what the new creative copy says in its language.

Guidance

Certain content requires transcreation to ensure accuracy and a positive view of your brand in another culture. For some of your content, this is by far the best option, yet also the most expensive. Some translation agencies offer transcreation, but others do not. Typically, the people who do this work are not translators but bilingual copywriters.

Translation by Bilingual Employees

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Benefits and Uses

Employees know your brand, have subject matter expertise, and can help ensure the right tone and style. However, they typically lack training in translation, especially in how to use professional translation tools. Often, they begrudge translation tasks because they fall outside of their job scope.

Risks

This option carries a lot of hidden costs, because employees end up doing work that falls outside of their core competency. Speed is likely to suffer when companies rely on internal staff who are being pulled in multiple directions. Likewise, quality will usually suffer, because bilinguals are unlikely to be familiar with the nuances of language.

Guidance

It's normal (and sometimes recommended) to involve employees in the review process to ensure quality, particularly when your vendors are still learning about your company. Your staff can provide guidance to translators as part of the review process, making comments on the translations to help the translators become familiar with your brand's unique tone and style. However, you shouldn't ask bilingual employees to translate. It's not a good use of their time or the company's investment in them for other purposes. It's preferable to rely on professional human translation and have your staff provide oversight until the point where they can minimize their involvement in the process or step out entirely.

Non-Professional Human Translation

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Benefits and Uses

This option, also known as “bulk translation,” is used primarily for large volumes of content for which quality is not essential, but for which speed is critical. In these situations, professional human translation through a double-pass or triple-pass review process is impossible or cost-prohibitive because of the timeframe and volume. This option cannot be used for specialized content. That said, this option costs less because the people who provide it are merely bilinguals, not trained professional translators.

Risks

This option carries a high risk of lower quality since the translators are neither professional nor specialized. Companies with a very large volume of non-specialized content that requires translation on a very short turnaround (for example, 10 million words to translate and publish in three days) sometimes turn to non-professional human translation because it offers them a better quality output than machine translation would, while still enabling them to meet their deadlines for publishing a large volume of content quickly.

Guidance

Quality is usually better with this option than with computer-generated or machine translation, but still nowhere near as good as professional human translation. Professional human translation offers superior quality, so some companies change their timelines to enable professional human translation.

Human Translation 5 by a Volunteer Community

Benefits and Uses

This option is used mostly by nonprofits and “cause-based” projects with a highly engaged and eager multilingual community. It enables highly engaged stakeholders to choose the content they feel is relevant to translate. This option is sometimes also used by for-profit companies with large and enthusiastic “fan bases” who are anxious to see content in their native languages and are willing to volunteer their time to share a cause, a product, or a source of entertainment with their friends, families, or customers.

Risks

This option carries a risk of lower quality since translators are not professional. However, the quality is often better than with non-professional human translation, because the community is smaller and its members have subject matter expertise in what they are translating. It is often difficult to keep the community engaged without significant time and attention from the organization itself. In many cases, this type of translation ends up costing more than professional human translation does, because organizations must support the volunteer community and motivate them. Also, organizations cannot easily use this option if they have specific deadlines for publication of translated content, as the volunteer community cannot be told what to do, or when. They can only be encouraged to work toward a given deadline, so there is a high risk of missing deadlines.

Guidance

Managing a volunteer translator community entails a lot of work and can be costly to manage. If your business is nonprofit, this might be an option to explore, but most organizations find that they need a combination of professional human translation and review to supplement the work of the volunteer community and to ensure quality. If you choose this option, it's important to recognize that the ability to meet deadlines is compromised or sacrificed entirely, and that quality may also suffer. Generally, this option does not work unless you already have a highly engaged community that has taken it upon themselves to begin translating. This option can work if you have a very large community, or if you have a small but highly dedicated group of volunteers. In either case, you will likely need to pay for professional human translation at some level to review the community's work and to translate certain content that cannot be trusted to a community – for example, legal disclaimers and other technical content.

Computer-Generated Translation



Benefits and Uses

Machine translation is used primarily for high-volume translation projects for which lower quality thresholds are acceptable. Machine translation may be used to get the “gist” of what the content means, and might be used for translating user-generated content or long-tail catalog content for which the costs of human translation cannot be justified or immediate turnaround is required.

There are two types of machine translation. The first is the kind you can obtain online from major search providers, such as Google or Bing. That type of translation generally cannot be trusted for any customer-facing content, as it’s often highly inaccurate and error-prone. It can only be used for giving someone a general idea of what something says in another language—but even then, it may give a false sense of meaning.

The other type is provided by machine translation companies that specialize in developing custom-built machine translation engines for enterprise use. This latter option is not usually accessible to small businesses because of the high costs, and is most often found among companies that have a huge amount of previously translated content with which to train the system. These companies typically try to reduce their overall translation costs by using machine translation on only very specific types of content.

Risks

This option carries a very high risk of poor quality, unless you invest significant amounts of content and money to “train” a machine translation engine to obtain better quality. Even then, it requires very large volumes of content, substantial budgets, and patience.

Guidance

Few companies use machine translation successfully, and it takes expertise to use machine translation wisely and avoid quality pitfalls.



Computer-Generated Translation with Human Editing

Benefits and Uses

Many companies wonder if they can reduce costs by using machine translation while improving quality by having human translators edit the machine translation output. This option can work for some purposes, but overall, it is only successful in a limited number of cases because of the risks described below.

Risks

Professional human translators dislike editing machine translation, and for valid reasons. It often takes them longer to “clean up” machine translation output than it would for them to translate from scratch. In essence, they often end up rewriting or re-translating, so it often entails more work for them, and yet the pay rates are lower. So, professional translators typically refuse to work on such projects.

For non-professional human translators, this option is more acceptable, because they are not accustomed to working with professional tools designed to enhance translation productivity and speed. So, this option can be used with non-professionals, but it carries a high risk that the quality will not be acceptable.

Guidance

Few companies use this option successfully. Increasingly, companies are experimenting with this process, particularly for projects that require high volumes of translation at speed. The quality may be better than machine translation output with no human intervention, but the quality is still far below professional human quality levels.

Hybrid Approach



Benefits and Uses

When there are multiple types of content, most companies find it useful to combine several of the translation options listed above, depending on the content in question. For example, your home page marketing content might require transcreation, your ecommerce checkout flow might use professional translation, legal terms and conditions would require specialized professionals, and user-generated content might use machine or bulk translation.

Risks

Mixing diverse options requires careful planning and expert guidance to ensure quality and consistency.

Guidance

More and more companies are combining an array of translation options. Use a sophisticated translation management system to effectively route all content to the appropriate workflows.

Conclusions

In summary, there are many translation options for your business, each of which carries different benefits and risks. Ask yourself the following questions when evaluating your translation options for each type of content you wish to translate:

1. How important is quality?
2. How important is turnaround time?
3. How important is scalability?
4. How important is cost?

The answers to these questions will help you identify the best choices for translating your content using Smartling.

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