

Following the Road Untraveled: From Source Language to Translation to Localization

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In moving from a domestic market, where A-dec enjoys substantial market share, to a more competitive global marketplace, where A-dec is barely known, this dental equipment manufacturer recognizes the need to take on more than a perfunctory effort at localization of documentation.

This session addresses the various aspects of producing quality technical, training, and marketing materials for products under the regulations for medical devices. In this context, presenters discuss how A-dec's corporate identity and pride of quality, which are based on culturally specific messages that don't "translate" neatly outside the domestic marketplace come under scrutiny for cultural relevance. A-dec's growth depends on making the transition to a more ethnographic approach to communication, particularly as it relates to localization efforts.

Context

A-dec is a family-owned business that has grown from five to almost a thousand people in its forty years of business. A-dec is located in the heart of the Willamette valley of rural Oregon, in a small town of about twenty thousand residents.

A-dec has enjoyed a substantial market share in the USA. During A-dec's early years, requirements for documentation translation were non-existent. As sales grew to include international customers, EU (European Union) requirements drove the need to provide product information (instructions for use, maintenance, and adjustments) in the form of User Guides.

The guides were translated in the minimal number of languages required by the EU for medical devices. When the EU requirements changed, about seven years ago, additional language versions were required for the countries where A-dec was sold.

About three years ago A-dec began a serious effort to grow in the international market. This has taken A-dec from translating to localization of product information that includes installation instructions, training materials, service guides, and sales literature.

Transition to Translation

A-dec's first efforts at translation were subject to the classic mistakes: trying in-house translation, not performing a quality check on the translated text, not editing the translations, and not having a production method or process for the update of translated documents when changes were made to the products. Even so, this method was used for a period of time, until A-dec realized that the translated documents did not necessarily correspond to the linguistic dialects of the languages spoken internationally.

Product changes soon were pronounced enough that the translated documents no longer accurately reflected the product they documented. Simultaneously, the EU had begun to enforce stricter guidelines for the documentation accompanying products within the EU-member countries. To meet EU requirements and update the documentation,

A-dec hired a translation bureau to translate user documentation. Because the translations met the needs of the EU, A-dec left its translations in the hands of the translation bureau, and turned its attention back to its “real” work of producing user support material.

From Translation to Localization

A few years later, A-dec shifted its corporate philosophy in an effort to become the world leader in the manufacturer of quality dental equipment. This involved a major revision of A-dec’s manufacturing processes and product design. Becoming a competitor in the global market became the driving force in how dental equipment was designed and produced. How support materials were designed and produced for those products were about to drastically change.

During the effort to expand in the international stage, A-dec began to study customer requirements. Their studies demonstrated that receiving better support materials was high on the customers’ wish lists, and in the customers’ minds was tied to quality of product.

The vast changes to product design created a need for redesign of support documents. This redesign initiated some critical changes to the way support documents were produced, including recognition that translating material must become an automatic extension of the publishing process.

At that point, outsourcing became not only a way of producing translated content, it became a way of outsourcing responsibility for international satisfaction. The response was that of a company that existed in a particular space/time continuum of the 20th century. In retrospect, it was a typical response for American companies dealing with support material that could not be produced in-house, and not comprehending the significance of responsible outsourcing. This mindset led to little or no control over the translation of documentation, with even A-dec product glossaries being kept by the service bureau.

The Epiphany

A-dec’s epiphany about their translated documentation came in response to a shared chuckle over a tissue packet translated into English, where a product benefit was described “as white as goose grease.” Were our translated documents comparable to ones that Americans often deride when they purchase a product accompanied by badly translated instructions? What if international customers were viewing the translated instructions provided by A-dec in a way that was incongruent with the self-image of an American company that takes pride in its domestically-produced products? And how can that pride get communicated to global markets without using the specific image connoting “American-made products for Americans”?

This epiphany led to the implementation of an internal review process to verify translations for accuracy *and* quality. The process was incorporated directly into the publishing cycle. Prior to the output and distribution process: going to print, burning CDs, or posting content on the Web site, internal representatives examined the translation for accuracy and appropriateness. The review revealed several problems, with both the process and the resulting documents:

- Some documents were not appropriately translated or considered “hokey” by the audience. The correlation between customers’ expectations of the document quality and product quality compromised the marketing message of A-dec leadership in the dental equipment field. A-dec wanted to communicate the same quality of product in the quality of the document being provided.
- Internal reviewers were introducing dialectic differences when editing documents. Many changes were based on personal preference or a particular style of speaking, not in translation inaccuracies. A-dec had no standardized vocabulary for reviewers to use when questions arose about word usage. Aside from the delay in production, the translations lacked the linguistic consistency that supports content clarity.
- The technical accuracy of the translations caused concern, not knowing if ambiguity may have been introduced into the translation, thereby increasing the risk of legal liability.
- Cultural differences that required unique approaches for marketing materials were not reflected in the translations.

Additionally, problems with the service bureau resulted in erratic billings and project delays. The day of simply abandoning responsibility and trust to the service bureau came to an abrupt end. A-dec began distributing projects among multiple service bureaus, to compare the quality of documents produced, and eventually settled on several service bureaus: one group for technical documentation, another for marketing material.

A-dec tested a few pieces of localized documentation with customers and marketing and sales representatives. The feedback was unanimous: localized content would convey the quality of A-dec products in the global market. A-dec was encouraged to explore localization as a smart business move, but it wasn’t easy to sell localization to A-dec as a corporation. The resistance largely stemmed from localization costs. The expense of localization is so significant that tangible evidence of its effectiveness is often needed to convince product managers and company executives that the investment can be recovered through increased sales. Translation was implemented for A-dec because they had to do it to be able to sell product internationally, and that became the justification.

Localization in the 21st Century

Localization has become incorporated into the document publishing process, standardizing what and how content is produced for markets outside of North America. Process changes were made to improve the publishing lead times. A-dec is on its way to becoming a more globally competitive company.

A-dec also exercises more control over the final, localized documents. Glossaries have been brought in-house and a corporate style guide was developed to aid the service bureaus and internal reviewers. Education of the reviewers has resulted in a smoother production process, and better quality of the final product.

Convinced that localizing documentation would guarantee A-dec spoke the same language as the customer, usability testing was introduced, with an ethnographic focus.

Using dealers, sales representatives, and technicians to test the content functionality ensures that the material meets quality standards in several areas.

Meeting Ongoing Challenges

A-dec continues to deepen its understanding of localization issues, and travels along the path to an unknown destination – if a destination can even be projected! The following examples demonstrate the twists and turns of our journey.

Expansion into the EU

In the EU, A-dec is considered a manufacturer of medical devices, and is required to provide maintenance and use instructions for our products in at least one accepted language for each EU country where A-dec product is sold. In the past, one language could suffice for several countries—for example, French is spoken in several European countries. Recently, the EU changed its language requirements, and documentation must be supplied in more languages. A-dec is planning localized sales literature, service manuals, training materials, and installation instructions for the first time. Because the cost of localization into all EU-required languages is costly, A-dec has narrowed its markets, and thus languages, to selected EU countries where market research shows the greatest potential. A-dec is a long way off from being as ubiquitous a name in European dentistry as it is in North America, but as the velocity of the A-dec meme increases, the sales potential will permit penetration into the lesser markets.

Localizing a Product Line

A-dec sells products in over 120 countries throughout Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, the UK, Australasia, and North and South America. A-dec recently localized its entire product line in eight languages: installation instructions, service guide, user guides, and advertising and sales brochures. The reactions from A-dec dealers have been outstanding. The sales personal are excited that they have sales literature in the language of their customers. The service technicians are excited to have installation and service information localized to their countries.

A-dec recognizes the long journey ahead to becoming a global presence in the dental equipment market, and is looking for manageable opportunities to support the work toward that goal.

Introduction of Content Management

The need to produce more, and better, documentation is balanced by the need to economize in the production of that material. A-dec is finalizing the requirements phase of a content management project that will see documentation being produced with a content management system by the end of 2005. The efficiencies of content re-use will allow A-dec to reduce initial production costs, and localization and localization production costs. The hope is that this initiative allows A-dec to expand the number of countries for which it can produce localized support materials.

Conclusion

The journey for A-dec's technical communicators has been one of self-discovery. The attention to the need for localized documentation has also generalized to generating interest in the need for localized marketing campaigns.

The maturation of the documentation process has coincided with the seasoning of the documentation staff. The skills development acquired during the process has shifted staff focus from local to localization. Much like Dorothy in the tale, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*¹, we don't know where our yellow brick road will lead, but we are following it with the knowledge that we've already been led "out of Kansas" toward the wide world of global communication, and we'll hone our talents along the way.

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¹ *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was published by L. Frank Baum in 1900. It is the best-selling children's book of all time; over 11 million copies have been sold in 52 languages. In this story of a girl from rural Kansas swept up during a tornado, Dorothy and companions she meets along the way travel a yellow brick road, which eventually leads them to the surreal city of Oz. It is through the journey itself that the travelers are made to have faith in themselves, and realize that they are not lacking in brains, heart, or courage, but to recognize that they had the ability all along to succeed.