

# Working with Direct Clients. For Real.

Chris Durban, FITI/SFT

ATA58, Washington, DC / October 2017 / © C. Durban

Target audience:  
Serious professionals.

- Not part-timers
- Not beginners
- Not the make-a-quick-buck-and-get-back-to-what-really-interests-me crowd (“lifestyle translators”)
- (Not cynics)

# “Direct clients”?

A few definitions to start. And while we're at it, let's specify that we are looking for **good** clients—a sustainable flow of serious customers who are passionate about what they do, who have attractive budgets, and who respect and value your work.

# “For real”?

This talk was inspired by a recent rash of webinars and courses on offer from translators who are not making a serious living translating. Many pitch attitudes and “insights” that condemn their students to the same flailing.

It is also inspired by huffing & puffing among experienced translators who persist in condescending to young translators. That’s annoying.

But above all it is a presentation of insights and suggestions based on my own experience.

Judge for yourself.

# Competence (non-negotiable)

RED ALERT!  
This is a prerequisite—and fundamental issue in professional ethics: don't bother seeking direct clients if you haven't **first** honed your translation skills.  
Allow me a little riff on this before we get into the concrete advice.

[...] In nearly 25 years as a professional translator, this is **one of the worst translations I have ever seen**. The report is filled with errors of every conceivable type: errors in syntax, grammar, spelling, terminology and – most importantly – translation errors. The translators seem to have made no effort whatsoever to understand the text, nor did they appear to do even the most basic Internet research concerning, for example, the correct names for institutions, geographic locations, commissions, etc. Finally, the English is cumbersome, difficult to read and totally lacking in style. The translators have not made any attempt to get away from French syntax and punctuation; as a consequence, the sentences often far too long and intercut with countless semicolons and colons.

To make this report readable, my colleague and I will have to go over **every single sentence on every page**. For the next four or five weeks, we will be working full-time not to revise or rewrite the document, but to **retranslate** it

The following is a very limited selection from among the hundreds of errors the document contains: [...]

Read this in-house translation department's response to a translation commissioned from an outside supplier (Lionbridge) and weep.  
**Don't let this be you.**

Tight deadline?  
Poor source text?  
Unreasonable customer?  
Unresponsive customer?  
Incompetent reviser?  
Incompetent translator(s)?



# Cynicism or Cluelessness?

Former agency owner:

“Your reference to scalability ‘speaks to me’ because that's precisely the reason I sold my company. My problem was that scalability—the argument many agencies use to kick down clients' doors—doesn't always rhyme with quality. (I'm still copied on emails from the new owners asking whether anyone — ANYONE???!—can please translate these X thousand words for tomorrow. PLEASE...).”

Cynicism, right? But do note that I'm not contrasting big bad agencies with small noble freelancers, because there are plenty of freelancers who deliver garbage, too. NB this is where signed work comes in: keeps everyone on the straight and narrow.

It's about time we mentioned  
**Bulk / Added-value / Premium**

For definitions and discussion, see Kevin Hendzel's  
April 29, 2017 blog at Word Prisms.

# What are buyers actually getting?

Concrete examples, please.



An example:  
TripAdvisor uses raw MT for its ratings—which is fine, **because they say so up front.** Readers get free input and cope with the oddnesses. Not so many other buyers of translation, who expect accurate translations that flow.

Let's agree that few if any translation suppliers, agency or freelance, claim to deliver so-so work.

**So why are so many translations so awkward?**

<i>(French source : minutes of a meeting of urban planners)</i>	<i>(Systran, now gone neural...)</i>	<i>(Google Translate)</i>	<i>Skilled human translator</i>
<p>Se pose également la question du sens de produire de l'intensité en périphérie, et de manière sous-jacente à animer l'espace public à côté d'un équipement de destination susceptible de catalyser toutes les fonctions d'animation.</p>	<p>There is also the question of the meaning of producing intensity on the periphery, and in an underlying way to animate the public space alongside a destination equipment that can catalyze all animation functions.</p>	<p>There is also the question of the meaning of generating intensity in the periphery, and so underlying animate public space next destination equipment capable of catalyzing all the animation features.</p>	<p>Another question: does it make sense to create “intensity”—a vibrant urban area—on the outskirts of a major city? And if we go a level deeper, does it make sense to promote activity in a public space right next to a destination facility that is likely to generate its own activity?</p>

MT vendors/geeks are quick to admit that their solutions are not a good fit for “poetry” and “marketing texts”.

Here we have a garden-variety set of minutes from a meeting of urban planners. Compare and contrast, keeping in mind that the client’s aim was to remind attendees of the energy in the room at their last session, and lure them back. **Which version does that best?**

**Example:**  
**Comparison of Fr>Eng neural MT (via Google Translate) with a text pitched as premium work by an ISO-certified translation company.**

**Note how closely the human translation resembles neural MT: tweaking here and there, but this attempt to scale up output ultimately dumbered everything down—delivering lopsided, awkward text that doesn't flow.**

Google Translate (neural)	Human translation A, agency intermediated, pitched as high quality <sup>1</sup>
<p>BRITAIN  <b>EXPLOITATION OF THE DOCKLANDS LIGHT RAILWAY</b>            Since 2014 and for another five years, <u>Keolis</u> operates the Docklands Light Railway (DLR), an automated metro network that transports each year 115 million travelers East of London.   Cumulative sales over seven years is 883 million euros. This network has achieved a high level of record customers in 2015: 89% (for a target contractual obligation of 86%).            This result is the result of a virtuous partnership between <u>KeolisAmey Docklands</u>, the joint venture (<u>Keolis</u> 70% - <u>Amey</u> 30%) which operates the network and Transport for London, the organizing authority in charge of transport in the capital British. Creating a Customer Action Team "of ten people, welcoming travelers at peak hours and delivering passenger information at disturbed situations is also for many.</p>	<p>UNITED KINGDOM  <b>OPERATION OF THE DOCKLANDS LIGHT RAILWAY</b>            Since 2014 and with another 5 years to go, <u>Keolis</u> has been running the Docklands Light Railway (DLR), an automated metro system which carries 115 million passengers each year in East London. Cumulative turnover over 7 years is 883 million euros. This network achieved a record customer satisfaction rate for <u>2015</u> : 89 % (for a contractual objective of 86 %).            This result is the outcome of a <u>virtuous partnership</u> between <u>KeolisAmey Docklands</u>, the joint venture (<u>Keolis</u> 70 % – <u>Amey</u> 30 %) running the network, and Transport for London, the public transport authority in charge of public transport in the British capital. The creation of a « Customer Action Team » of 10 people, welcoming passengers in stations during rush hours and issuing passenger information at the time of any disturbance is also an important part of</p>



**Example:**  
The post-edited automated output is compared here with a second human translation.

**Note the differences.**

**Think about the time, talent and effort involved in producing the second example. The wetware.**

**Q: Did the first translator realize how awkward/stilted her work was?**

**It was delivered to the (unhappy) client as “premium” work.**

Human translation A, agency intermediated, pitched as high quality <sup>1</sup>	Human translation B, direct client, pitched as high quality <sup>2</sup>
<p>UNITED KINGDOM <b>OPERATION OF THE DOCKLANDS LIGHT RAILWAY</b> Since 2014 and with another 5 years to go, <u>Keolis</u> has been running the Docklands Light Railway (DLR), an automated metro system which carries 115 million passengers each year in East London. Cumulative turnover over 7 years is 883 million euros. This network achieved a record customer satisfaction rate for 2015 : 89 % (for a contractual objective of 86 %). This result is the outcome of a <u>virtuous partnership</u> between <u>KeolisAmey Docklands</u>, the joint venture (<u>Keolis 70 % – Amey 30 %</u>) running the network, and Transport for London, the public transport authority in charge of public transport in the British capital. The creation of a « Customer Action Team » of 10 people, welcoming passengers in stations during rush hours and issuing <u>passenger information</u> at the time of any disturbance is also an important part of this.</p>	<p>UNITED KINGDOM <b>STRONG SHOWING FOR DOCKLANDS LIGHT RAILWAY</b> In 2014, <u>Keolis</u> won a seven-year, €883 million contract to operate the Docklands Light Railway (DLR), a driverless metro system serving east London. The DLR carries 115 million passengers annually, and in 2015 it scored 89% customer satisfaction—the highest in the network’s history—outperforming the 86% target set by the contract. This strong showing is the result of a win-win partnership between <u>KeolisAmey Docklands</u>, the joint venture (<u>Keolis 70 %/Amey 30 %</u>) that operates the system, and Transport for London, the organizing authority for transport in the British capital. One key factor in DLR’s success is its ten-person Customer Action Team, created to deliver in-station passenger assistance at peak travel times and provide travel information during service disruptions.</p>



French source text	Google Translate (neural)	Human translation A, agency intermediated, pitched as high quality <sup>1</sup>	Human translation B, direct client, pitched as high quality <sup>2</sup>
<p>GRANDE-BRETAGNE  <b>EXPLOITATION DU DOCKLANDS LIGHT RAILWAY</b>  Depuis 2014 et pour encore cinq ans, <u>Keolis</u> exploite le <u>Docklands Light Railway</u> (DLR), un réseau de métro automatique qui transporte chaque année 115 millions de voyageurs à l'Est de Londres. Le chiffre d'affaires cumulé sur sept ans est de 883 millions d'euros. Ce réseau a atteint un taux de satisfaction clients record en 2015 : 89 % (pour un objectif contractuel de 86 %). Ce résultat est le fruit d'un partenariat vertueux entre <u>KeolisAmey Docklands</u>, la joint-venture (<u>Keolis</u> 70 % – <u>Amey</u> 30 %) qui exploite le réseau et Transport for London, l'autorité organisatrice en charge des transports dans la capitale britannique. La création d'une « Customer Action Team » de dix personnes, accueillant les voyageurs en stations aux heures de pointe et délivrant l'information voyageurs lors des situations perturbées y est aussi pour beaucoup.</p>	<p>BRITAIN  <b>EXPLOITATION OF THE DOCKLANDS LIGHT RAILWAY</b>  Since 2014 and for another five years, <u>Keolis</u> operates the Docklands Light Railway (DLR), an automated metro network that transports each year 115 million travelers East of London. Cumulative sales over seven years is 883 million euros. This network has achieved a high level of record customers in 2015: 89% (for a target contractual obligation of 86%). This result is the result of a virtuous partnership between <u>KeolisAmey Docklands</u>, the joint venture (<u>Keolis</u> 70% - <u>Amey</u> 30%) which operates the network and Transport for London, the organizing authority in charge of transport in the capital British. Creating a Customer Action Team "of ten people, welcoming travelers at peak hours and delivering passenger information at disturbed situations is also for many.</p>	<p>UNITED KINGDOM  <b>OPERATION OF THE DOCKLANDS LIGHT RAILWAY</b>  Since 2014 and with another 5 years to go, <u>Keolis</u> has been running the Docklands Light Railway (DLR), an automated metro system which carries 115 million passengers each year in East London. Cumulative turnover over 7 years is 883 million euros. This network achieved a record customer satisfaction rate for 2015 : 89 % (for a contractual objective of 86 %). This result is the outcome of a virtuous partnership between <u>KeolisAmey Docklands</u>, the joint venture (<u>Keolis</u> 70 % – <u>Amey</u> 30 %) running the network, and Transport for London, the public transport authority in charge of public transport in the British capital. The creation of a « Customer Action Team » of 10 people, welcoming passengers in stations during rush hours and issuing passenger information at the time of any disturbance is also an important part of this.</p>	<p>UNITED KINGDOM  <b>STRONG SHOWING FOR DOCKLANDS LIGHT RAILWAY</b>  In 2014, <u>Keolis</u> won a seven-year, €883 million contract to operate the Docklands Light Railway (DLR), a driverless metro system serving east London. The DLR carries 115 million passengers annually, and in 2015 it scored 89% customer satisfaction—the highest in the network's history—outperforming the 86% target set by the contract. This strong showing is the result of a win-win partnership between <u>KeolisAmey Docklands</u>, the joint venture (<u>Keolis</u> 70 %/<u>Amey</u> 30 %) that operates the system, and Transport for London, the organizing authority for transport in the British capital. One key factor in DLR's success is its ten-person Customer Action Team, created to deliver in-station passenger assistance at peak travel times and provide travel information during service disruptions.</p>

The time factor.

The wetware factor.

The talent factor.

Despite aggressive (or clueless) vendors' claims, these factors simply don't scale the way terminology, research, layout [etc.] do.

If you are pitching to good direct clients, you'll need to think about this. And build them into your process.

Time pressure  
+ blind spots + cynicism + overselling +  
cluelessness + mindless automation

All of these have a direct impact on the product/  
service you are offering (duh).

# Frustration

(on all sides)

Life is short.  
Don't you  
contribute to  
the global  
balance in the  
World  
Frustration  
Bank.  
**Don't oversell  
your services.**

# Money Issues.

# *Filthy lucre: Translators and money*

*[...] How much should translators charge? What is “fair”—or is that even relevant? When does pricing (up or down) get arrogant or abusive? And does the mere act of bargaining devalue our status as intellectual service providers? (So tacky! So... capitalist.)*

*All this when most translators are simply looking for a way to make the case for the value they create with ease, grace—and success. Is that so hard? [...]*

Draft blurb:  
One day I will give this talk. (The association I offered it to declined; they were... uneasy.) In the meantime, I've incorporated some of the thinking below<sup>33</sup>

# Discomfort

(money is so tacky—or is it?)

Now some suggestions for those seeking (good) direct clients...



Don't assume that price  
is buyers' #1 priority

Don't base pricing on your  
experience at the bulk end of the  
market.

Don't pitch yourself as “less expensive than...”

Do team up with a reviser.

# Never criticize a client to another client.

Slamming clients says less about them than about you  
(why are you working with bad clients in the first place?)

# Eschew snark.

It passes for wit on some translator discussion boards, but is ultimately a turn-off. The same applies to cynicism. If you can't summon genuine enthusiasm for your clients and their texts, you're better off working through an intermediary.

# Be generous.

The extreme caution that may have served you well in bulk markets  
is a turn-off for premium customers.

# Be honest.

Think Dunning-Kruger.



# Do the work.

Once you've honed your translation skills, identify your targets and stalk them (with grace and class).

Think deep, not wide.

There's nothing wrong with  
cultivating an air of mystery.

Many translators talk too much about themselves  
in the presence of clients.

**Beware of dumbing down  
to scale up.**

With thanks to Seth Godin

(Good) client acquisition is  
a long-term affair.

But it's worth making the effort.

# Invest in yourself and your business.

You're playing a long game here.

Also...

# Consider limiting your time on social media.

TranslatorLand can be a time suck  
and an echo chamber.  
And it is definitely not ClientLand.



# Take responsibility and credit.

SIGN YOUR WORK.

You can find Catherine Jan's interview with me on this topic on the web. It describes exactly how signing works.

And I'll add a slide below to illustrate (your name appears in the document's credits).

SNCF Group  
Direction Cohésion & Ressources humaines  
Agence Communication RH – [sncf.communicationrh@sncf.fr](mailto:sncf.communicationrh@sncf.fr).  
Design and production: **meanings**.

Photos: Fred de Gasquet, Sébastien Godefroy,  
Maxime Huriez, Keolis, Adrien Toubiana, SNCF.  
Printed by: Assistance Printing. June 2014.  
English text: Durban/Clementi.

~~Writing~~ Translation is easy.  
All you do is stare at a blank  
piece of paper until drops of  
blood form on your forehead.”

(with apologies to Gene Fowler)

Ha ha. But translation isn't easy, of course. If it were, everybody would be doing it successfully. Yet since it's the best job in the world, it's worth working hard to get it right. Right?

What serious freelance translators interested in building a direct clientele can do right now:

# Pull up your socks

- Claiming expertise in a vacuum proves nothing: do the work, sign the work, show the work.
- Yes, sign it—take responsibility and take credit.
- Take your “duty of care” vis-à-vis clients seriously. Ethics, people.
- Translators tend to be granular (words on page). Step back and take in the big picture.
- Analyze that big picture. Then develop and offer solutions that work.
- Get out of your cave. Actively seek a higher profile... connect with decision-makers to promote the “people like us do it like this” mantra.

Targeting direct clients definitely affects pricing and business development for skilled professional translators and interpreters.

Interested in pursuing this?

# Decide where you want to be. And do the work to get there.

If **bulk**, master the technology—and don't claim to deliver quality beyond your ability.

If **added value**, be aware that the fall in bulk prices as automation gains ground will affect you, too. And don't claim to deliver quality beyond your ability.

If **premium**, note that you will have to work very hard on your writing skills and specialization(s), because the bar is far, far higher than what you may have been delivering in added-value segments.

Questions?  
chris.durban@gmail.com