



The Business of Interpreting: FAQ 8 – What is the most sustainable interpreting market?

A diverse client base can be the cornerstone of a stable career in freelance conference interpreting.

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Things have been going well, you have lots of work with a great client, you are earning lots of money – and then suddenly bam! Something happens... and now you are making almost nothing. Your loyal client is no longer hiring you more than once in a blue moon. What can you do?

In actual fact, the question should be “what could I have done to prevent it”? Putting all your eggs in one basket is never a good career move – that’s why there are sayings and fables about it. So let’s take a look at clients and how we can make our situation more sustainable.

The myth of the ideal client

Most of us would think that finding that one client who can hire us every day of the year for decent fees and conditions is a godsend. How fantastic, we don’t have to take the time to market, research new jobs, figure out how to work for a new client, or anything else! We are practically employees, but still able to take our vacations when we want to.

Most often, this type of client is the hiring agent in a government interpretation service, an international organization or an agency. You like the work and don’t have to worry. Your contact knows you and your work, likes you and the ease of dealing with you, and trusts you. For them, you are a consistent element, so why would they bother trying to find another?

This is all well and good, but have you considered how fragile this situation is? What happens if your longtime contact falls ill, or retires, or changes jobs? Have you been nurturing an authentic relationship with them so you know ahead of time that they are moving, so you can make plans? Have you been educating this person for a long time, and can you ask them to pass on the fruits of that education to their replacement or to include them in a standard operating procedures file?

Or even more out of your control, what if you’ve been working for an international organization, and your main language combination is dependent on the political or economic situation in the world? In other words, the major country that speaks your language does something the international organization considers to be beyond the pale, and suddenly they no longer hire anyone with your languages?

Or have you thought about subprime loan risks that spread throughout the global economy? Governments the world over cut their budgets, so many international organizations are now just trying to keep their heads above water and there is much less work for interpreters.

These are all-too-familiar situations that can happen to any of us at any time, and all have happened to some of us. We can cross our fingers and hope that things will pick up again in the near future – though this isn't very helpful because while the economic situation has only just started moving, it looks to be sinking again; the political situation looks frozen. And how long will this new hiring officer who actively doesn't want to hire us stay in the job?

Or is there a more sustainable way of finding regular work?

Alternatives

Somewhat counterintuitively, direct clients on the private market look to be the most sustainable way of working as a freelance interpreter today. Such clients are easier to get to know, and have multiple means of entry – you may get a toehold in the export department, and then get called to work with the marketing and sales departments. Once the company has a long term relationship abroad, you might get brought in to help manage their customer relations. And any time anyone makes a trip to visit that market, you have another job.

If you think about it, even if governments aren't talking to one another, individuals still do. There will always be some sort of business relationship that people need to maintain. When deals go wrong, there will be international arbitration. And there are always some sort of civil society efforts that need interpreters. It may not be what you would strictly call conference interpreting, but these are fields that many of us have worked in.

If you have a strong base of private clients, even if they are concentrated in a particular niche, you don't have to worry as much if one of them disappears. Even if they are in the same niche, they may be at different stages in developing their foreign markets. You don't have to worry when the hiring agent at one of them changes, that the economic situation in one company will be reflected in exactly the same way in all of them, or that a suddenly different political situation will hit each of them identically.

Moreover, if you have been educating all your points of contact to work with you as a full member of the team, and if you have been maintaining an authentic relationship with them, then when they move on, it may be a great opportunity for you! They may leave instructions for their successors, who will then understand that the company already knows, likes and trusts you; you'll have less marketing to do to keep them as a client. Plus, you will have the added value of knowing that a second company doesn't need the same level of education, because your former contact point is now preaching your cause in the new company.

So if sustainability is the watchword, and market diversification is the best way of remaining sustainable, then put more of your eggs in the direct client basket!

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