



# The Business of Interpreting: FAQ 9 – What is the customer decision journey?

An examination of how potential clients may find you and, in turn, you can become their go-to conference interpreter for years to come.

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**What will trigger a potential client’s realization that they need an interpreter?** And how will they go about finding one? Hard to say right off the bat, so let’s start by thinking about how we search for something, for example terms for a medical conference. The internet, of course – but where exactly?

There are many search engines available, bringing up lots of websites - some gathering all sorts of terminology, others giving you just one term at a time. One of the medical speeches will be about how substances in smaller quantities can be helpful, but larger can kill you – digitalis is one example. So you look up *digitalis* and get lots of photos of flowers, one of which you just saw in your garden. Really? What’s its common name? Foxglove! Hmm, where did that name come from? And you find that in various Gaelic languages, it’s “folksgloves”, like fairy folk. Then you wonder, do languages other than Gaelic mention the fairies when talking about this plant? And down the rabbit hole you go, not looking up from your computer for hours.

The internet has so many different paths that no one’s journey is alike, even if they start at the same place. And really, maybe no one even starts at the same place either - you noticed the digitalis, maybe another interpreter focused on nanoparticles.

Our potential clients face the same problem. They could start with a search for linguists; they may understand that they want spoken or oral translators. They might even know the word interpreter, though some of those hits will bring up actors or computer programs that execute other programs. They could look for an individual, or an agency. They may already know someone who knows someone. Or they may simply call the local university to ask for a student who speaks that language, or the embassy of that country. There is no set path.

## The customer decision journey

So let’s take a look at the typical customer decision journey. **It starts off with a trigger**, something that prompts a search, in this case for an interpreter. That trigger could be anything – the boss wants to invite a famous speaker from another country to the AGM, the CEO has just thought about expanding into overseas markets, or the EU suddenly realizes that all their French interpreters with German will be retiring in the next few years. In other words, it could be anything.

The next phase of the journey is research. This is the scary part, as clients most probably don't know you, may not even be aware of your industry, and they could go anywhere. They have multiple paths available, such as recommendations from friends and colleagues, television, print media, the yellow pages, and of course the internet.

Social media may help, if you are a prominent contributor of content that educates buyers on your own website as well as on LinkedIn and other platforms where serious clients would expect to find a professional. But it may also hurt, since it is easy to find others doing the same thing as you, as well as numerous other distractions. And SEO doesn't always work here, e.g. if the client heads in a direction that is different from what you consider logical – keep in mind that phone call to the embassy! This phase is when clients gather and evaluate most of the information they need to find the interpreter(s) they will finally hire. In today's world of immediate gratification, it may take very little time.

Once they have evaluated the information, clients start contacting the interpreters and agencies they found. In fact, well over fifty percent of their buying process will have been completed before they ever contact anyone – which means that clients already have in mind a ranking of the people or agencies they are contacting, and if the first person who answers even comes close to what the potential client wants, they will most probably get the job.

So any information they get from you both during and immediately after the search phase will be critical, as it will differentiate you from the mass of other providers that they are in effect interviewing. This is where all your homework on what [value you provide](#) and how you differ from other interpreters will come in handy. Never merely state a price and end the call – you *must* have a conversation. The easiest way to start would be by asking where they found you, which is good market research for you as well. After that, make sure to ask all the questions you need to do due diligence on the client and the event, and listen carefully to the answers. If their problem is one you can solve, let them know that you will get back to them in [name a time] with an offer. Then get back to them at that time without fail, to start building trust.

The next point on the journey is when you are offered the job. This is only the halfway point in the customer journey, and takes little time, just like the trigger. It takes place once and is the start of the second half of the circle, a portion that most of us ignore.

## Groundwork for the future

**You shouldn't think that you can simply sign the contract, provide the service, get paid, and have a satisfied client.** You may not realize it, but there are multiple contacts you will have with the client during the process of providing your services: obtaining documents, providing input on equipment, advising on how to ensure the event is truly multilingual as opposed to an event with a superficial patch of last-minute interpreter hires. Each one of those contacts will lead your client into thinking that you are easy to work with, fulfill their needs, and have an engaging personality – or it could prove the opposite. At the end of the day, it isn't just your interpreting – it is this phase that makes or breaks you.

In fact, mediocre to bad customer experience is the norm, so anything you can do to enhance this relationship and experience will ensure that clients see you not simply as a service provider, but as the expert and partner that contributed to a successful event. Clients will not only know, like and trust you for the future, but they will become your advocates in a densely crowded and highly competitive market.

If a client is happy, ask for a written testimonial or a recommendation online, and for possible referrals to new contacts. The written aspect of a testimonial cements their opinion of you in their

minds, and the social aspect shows others that clients speak positively about you, which of course is much more valuable than you talking about yourself.

At this point, you have come full circle back to when something new triggers the need to hire an interpreter. But since the previous experience was so positive, why would clients waste time repeating the research and evaluation process? They call you directly, and you take the shortcut directly to the point where you are hired again.

This is a simplified model of how a client finds a service provider. There are many other models that make the rounds, such as the funnel model (you run into that when you click to receive a free report and are required to give your email address to have it sent to you), or the hero journey (described by Joseph Campbell and exemplified by Luke Skywalker), but this one sums up best what we ourselves have to deal with when clients find us.

I bet that most of those that called you out of the blue have already done a minimum of research, at least to find your name, even if that was simply searching for “spoken translator” + “your foreign language” + “your city”. It’s your job to then make their calls to you into such engaging conversations, showcasing your value to them, that they go no further, and become your biggest fans.

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