



The Business of Interpreting: FAQ 11 – How do I win the bid?

Competing for jobs on price alone is a no-win game. Building your brand based on trust and relationships pays in the long run.

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We've all been there, right? We get a phone call with our perfect assignment, all but offered on a silver platter. It's in our niche, with our ideal customer, we know what the market will bear, and we know we are in the right geographical area. We have all the information the prospect wants, and they are speaking to us one-on-one.

And then... silence. Or the dreaded "thank you, but" email comes – thank you, but we have decided not to go through with this job. Or perhaps – thank you, but we have found someone else who better fits our budget.

Why you don't want to win the bid

Of course we didn't win the bid! And frankly, under these circumstances, nor should we have. Someone called us and asked our availability and price. That's it, nothing else. They didn't offer any more information, and they didn't answer any of our questions – if we bothered to ask any.

These are all signs that the prospect was just looking for the service provider with the lowest price. They have limited knowledge about our profession – all they know is that they need someone with our working languages. They assume we are all the same, because they found us on the website of our professional association. So their only point of comparison is price. Even if we volunteer more information, send in a CV, or try to engage them in a conversation, they would still only look at the price. And there is *always* someone cheaper than us.

That means that to win the bid, we have to be cheaper than anyone else the prospect can find with a quick online search. But do we really want to be the cheapest? It's a tough position to defend, as someone else could always come in just that little bit cheaper. And it's not like we don't have bills to pay. It's true that we can have a large amount of flexibility in the rates we charge, but if we are always the cheapest then we have to work more hours to pay those same bills.

Moreover, we have to find a partner to work with – interpreting with us, providing the equipment. Which means that the fact that we charged rock-bottom rates will spread to the rest of the market, becoming part of our reputation and brand. And even if we can find someone to work with us at these low rates, we won't inspire loyalty in our partners.

Surely there's a better way to win bids?

Don't worry, it can be done. Perhaps I can illustrate with a personal experience:

A tale of two jobs

Two jobs, both alike in every respect:

- two lawyers – let's call them Lawyer A and Lawyer B – called within a month of each other
- to interpret for similar legal jobs – Job A and Job B
- the same language combination
- the same team strength
- the same type of interpreting.

Legal interpreting happens to be one of the areas where I do a lot of work. I know the pitfalls, so I know what to include in my contract. I know the rates that the market will bear. I know who I'd want on my team. I probably know more than the lawyers about the rules in certain venues.

I sent in my fees and conditions to each of them. I also sent in a CV, and expressed my desire to help.

This is where the story splits:

I found out later that Lawyer A was shopping around. They had spoken with at least one other interpreter, and most probably several. Fair enough.

As you can imagine, I did not get Job A. Lawyer A wrote a polite "thank you, but" email declining my services. Reasons given (to me and the other bidder I know of) were many and strange: they wanted someone closer to the city (where all of us are based), they wanted someone who could better accommodate their client's schedule (we all could). And they wanted someone who better fit their client's budget. Ah, now there's the rub!

Lawyer B, in contrast, contacted only me. Having asked for my fees and conditions, they said everything was fine, and asked that I note down the dates of the event in my calendar. Thank you very much, very happy to do business with you, *fait accompli*!

Every respect but one

The crucial difference between Lawyer A and Lawyer B is how they found me.

Lawyer A searched my professional association's website, and wrote to me (and others) from that list. There was no attempt at any personal connection and no relationship at all.

Lawyer B had a need, and asked a former colleague for a referral to a good interpreter. The colleague referred me. Lawyer B then contacted me, gave me the details, and accepted my fees and conditions.

There was no bid, nor any competition. There was just a satisfied customer, with whom I stay in touch, giving a recommendation to a former colleague. This meant that, from the outset there was a foundation for trust and reciprocity, even before we discussed availability or price.

Start the relationship

To convert your Lawyer As into Lawyer Bs, **you must build a relationship**. In Lawyer A's case, I made sure not to send only my fees and conditions, but also a CV that showed my expertise in this field, as well as an email stating that I was ready to help. While nothing came of it this time, perhaps I managed to plant a seed. They may call again for a future client with an appropriate budget, after having had experience with someone with less expertise, or less of a desire to build a relationship.

In the meantime, Lawyer B will not have complete radio silence from me. Nothing too much, but a note now and again to keep me top of mind. If the job gets cancelled, it won't be due to concerns about my professionalism, but because one of the parties decided not to continue. And by the time we meet in person, I will be cemented in their mind as the best choice they ever made.

Learn to recognize and avoid the reverse auctions out there. Rather, focus on building and maintaining relationships. In the longer-term it will pay off.

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