CONTACT ETHICS FOR TRANSLATORS

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Abstract: The present article tries to present the importance of contact ethics, mentioning six types of contact: mail, phone, e-mail, video, social network and cold contacting. The article discusses the advantages of each type, highlighting the importance of e-mail ethics and the possibilities of social networks. The conclusion mentions the difficulties of contacting possible clients, due to the advertisement and propaganda tactics applied by the media.

Keywords: translator, contact, ethics, deadline, client.

Introduction

Managing clients is one of the vital activities for translators in order to maintain their business. That is why the notion of *contact ethics* refers to at least six different types of contact with (prospective) clients. Thus we would like to discuss issues of *mail ethics* (traditional), *phone ethics* (standard voice-based), *e-mail ethics* (standard text-based), *video ethics* (appearance-based), *social network ethics* (modern) and *cold contacting*.

From today's prism, a somewhat overenthusiastic introduction to contacting people is the following:

> Thanks to the Internet, professionals from all over the world can be in regular contact by email or various forms of instant messaging. Work can be sent and received electronically, across national and cultural borders. This has several consequences: First, in theory, you can work for clients anywhere in the world. The market for translations need not be your city or your country... All you have to do is list your name, language combinations and areas of specialization on one of the many web sites that aim to put translators and clients in touch with each other. One would expect this process to lead to a situation where the fees paid for translations will become virtually the same all over the world, in keeping with theories of a global market. This, however, is very far from happening. (Biau Gil & Pym, 2006, p. 7)

We can agree that the last sentence is rather sobering. The task of the translator is still to serve the reader (Imre, 2013, p. 95). The intended effect of translating a text (Benjamin, 2000, p. 19) makes sense only if the translator has potential clients. Hence we can say that contacting them is still vital for the translation business, even if "you'll have weeks where you want to unplug your phone so that clients will stop calling, and weeks where you feel like you'll never be called by a client again" (McKay, 2006, p. 63).

1. Mail ethics

Although *mail ethics* is listed as a possible traditional text-based contact option, in our opinion its use is rather limited. Many people remember that decades ago the mail address represented one of the most reliable contact option (together with the phone). However, today this is different, mail addresses are usually considered private and should we know someone's mail address, it should not be used for business purposes. Résumés used to contain mail addresses, but not any more. If they are preserved, they are strictly limited to office mail address. In conclusion we strongly discourage contacting anyone via his/her personal mail address. Even if we would like to send a greeting card, the office mail address should do.

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Mail ethics thus usually means relatively short written texts with a clear particular message, paying attention to important details, such as the heading, salutation, or the reason for contacting the person. As mails are now considered traditional (almost old-fashioned enough to be considered classy), we must have a very good reason to use this way of business communication, which should be specified in the content of the mail/letter. The distinction between formal and informal letters should be remembered, as ignorance is not an excuse (e.g. salutation).

2. Phone ethics

Living in the age of cutting edge technology, many predicted the end of "obsolete" standard (only) voice-based contact options, such as phones. Many sci-fi movies from the 1970s contained scenes with video calls, which has turned reality in the meantime. However, on the one hand, phones have turned into smart phones for the past decade, taking over many functions from personal computers and notebooks. There are even in-between options, such as tablets and phablets. On the other hand, traditional phones may still be purchased from a variety of reasons. Seemingly, landline phones are a must for respectable companies, even for small contractors having an office. Furthermore, customer psychology highlights the advantage of only voice contacts, as it is much easier to hide our intentions.

Phone ethics includes proper timing for calls (taking into consideration time zones) and strictly during office hours, not very early and not very late. The length of a phone call should not be too long, but it may be extended based on the clients' needs. The major advantage of contacting someone via the phone (in an instance) should be proportional to the desired aim. If the client is willing to answer the phone, it may be the fastest way to reach our goal. However, phone calls may not be used for taking really important decisions: a translator may not expect from the client to offer certain answers this way. Phone calls are suitable for establishing meetings or reminding each other certain things (such as deadlines) and they should be considered as such.

3. E-mail ethics

Since the invention of social networks, e-mails are not considered to be very fashionable among the majority of Internet users, yet they are highly used among professionals. Before the appearance of cloud-based services (*Dropbox, Google Drive, Copy*, etc.), attaching documents to e-mails was a very important feature even with the danger of attaching viruses. Consequently, this text-based contact option has more components when ethics is concerned: creating an e-mail address, setting the e-mail software, sending e-mails (text-producing), attachments and replying e-mails.

3.1. Creating an e-mail address

Creating an e-mail address seems to be easy at first sight. However, if we have in mind professionalism, we have to consider certain aspects. First of all, the rationale for creating an e-mail address is for keeping in touch with people, in our case business contacts. This means that the e-mail address should look as professional as possible. The most plausible option is to use our first name and last name (or their initials); if we have our own webpage (a professional requirement), then we can have the webpage name as the domain name followed by the "dot" section: *johnsmith@smithtranslations21stcentury.com*. The address may be funny, within reasonable limits (nicknames), and it should not contain personal information, such as the owner's birth year, birthday, the start year of translation, etc. The key idea here is to easily remember the address, so special characters (underscore, asterisk, etc.) should be eliminated. Let us remember the last time when we had to tell our e-mail address during a telephone conversation with significant background noise.

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Non-professional e-mail addresses may be used with friends, relatives, or people we have no business contacts with. Deterrent e-mail addresses for professional communication are of various types (including abusive names of cultural, religious, etc. background), such as iamgod@anywhere.com (English), celmaitaregagiu@pepamant.ro (Romanian), bociazisten666@gmail.com (Hungarian). To sum up, building trust may start with a proper e-mail address.

3.2. Writing and sending an e-mail

The ethics of e-mail texts comprises all the aspects mentioned in the mail ethics section, with several important additions. One of them is the character encoding problem, as in case the character settings of e-mails are not proper, the client may not be able to read it. At present two of the most typical character settings are Unicode or Central European (ISO) in Europe (to avoid seeing a string of various icons, shapes and signs instead of a language specific letter), but depending on the clients' needs, this may be changed to Japanese, Arabic, etc.

The subject line should be short and contain the essence of the message, offering the client the possibility to remember the content of the message after having it read.

Kis & Mohácsi offer further recommendations: e-mail texts should be always unformatted text document, without links, and without using .rtf or html formats. The authors' advice in case of important text-parts: use separator lines, or special symbols/characters to highlight (Kis & Mohácsi-Gorove, 2008, p. 28).

The style of e-mail should be always formal or – the most – fairly informal. Never use impolite remarks or slang, paying a particular attention to spelling (always with diacritical marks). Should a translator formulate a text with spelling mistakes or without diacritical marks, it may result in the question: What if he/she commits the same mistakes during translation as well? The answer is obvious.

The e-mail message should be short, strict to the point, polite and firm, ending with various contact details: full name, position, office address, phone number (even multiple options from different service providers) to offer the prospective client a variety of possibilities to contact you. This may be easily set by the automatic signature option (even in two languages, having in mind translation).

To round it off, it is also good to know the carbon copy (CC) or blank carbon copy (BCC) options. Expert users – in the long run – may even go further and explore particular options to save the address book in Outlook (Express), text file (LDIF, .tab, .csv, .txt) or vCard file (.vcf); this comes very handy before reinstalling the operating system. Further options may include ask for confirmation of received mail and handling attachments, leading us to the next section.

3.3. Attachments

Adding various types of files to e-mails is often needed in case of translation jobs. That is why certain rules apply here as well. From the outset, we should remember not to name files with diacritical marks, as they may result in a string of various signs and symbols, especially when archived (zipped, compressed) and opened using a different computer. According to the experts, we should never attach .doc(x), .html, .htm, .rtf, .exe files, even if we have to attach a single file; thus compression is advisable, otherwise they may be virus-suspect (Kis & Mohácsi-Gorove, 2008, pp. 21–30). Furthermore, certain clients may require to add a password to open attachments (in case of very important documents), the key for which should be sent in a separate e-mail. This may sound paranoid, but who knows?

A further advantage of compression is that two or more files belonging to the same project are easier to store this way (or a backup copy, which is advisable at all times). In this

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respect, *7zip* is an excellent tool (freeware) to compress files into .zip format (unless a different format is required, for instance .rar), which can be easily opened running using various operating systems. Compressing files before sending them is also advisable in case of larger files, as the typical maximum attachable size is around 25 MB. Anything larger than that size, should be sent via cloud storage services or online upload sites (e.g. wetransfer.com, fastupload.ro, toldacuccot.hu).

3.4. Receiving and replying an e-mail

Professional translators check their mailbox at regular intervals (at least once a day). This includes junk mail section and spam as well (messages from unknown addresses may easily end up here). After having received the mail, we should always confirm it, which means that we have already checked the attachment(s), downloaded and successfully opened them. It may be embarrassing to notice the sender shortly before the deadline that there are problems with accessing a file (meaning that we have not even tried to work on it in due time).

If it is true that 'A stitch in time saves nine.', then it should be applied to downloading files to particular folders where we can easily find them. All popular web browsers (*Google Chrome*, *Mozilla Firefox*, etc.) have the option of selecting the download location each time before download (and not use automatically the Downloads folder). If the attachment contains the translation job, a short confirmation will do, promising a price offer within reasonable limits of time (24-48 hours). This entails that no translation job should be ever accepted without having it entirely seen/checked first (Kis & Mohácsi-Gorove, 2008, p. 22). Failing to answer an e-mail within 48 hours may lead to losing the particular translation job, or even losing the client. If the translation job cannot be carried out in due time or we are not satisfied with the terms of service offered by the client a polite refusal should be formulated (if possible with alternatives, such as trying their luck with other translators).

In case we have no Internet access for a longer period of time (e.g. vacation), the automatic vacation response should be activated in which we can specify when we are to access our e-mails the earliest.

In case of clenching a successful deal, when sending the translated file(s), we should always thank the client the opportunity, encouraging them to further cooperation. Those who do not feel themselves comfortable with that may lose clients without realizing why.

A final thought in this section is connected to time management. McKay warns us that too much time may be spent in front of the computer reading and responding to e-mails (McKay, 2006, p. 66): "Unless you're expecting an important message, give yourself a set time to check e-mail, for example every hour on the hour for a maximum of ten minutes." If we have separate e-mail account(s) for private mailing, this is not too difficult a piece of advice to follow.

4. Video ethics

Although not very typical, clients might initiate a video call, which is appearance-based contact. In this case we should follow a certain dress code, which also involves a background check: the client should not see anything disturbing behind us. The popular video contact options (*Yahoo! Messenger*, *Skype*, *Facebook*, etc.) may save time and energy, but we should use this option only in case the client initiates it and we are comfortable with that. The client may have reasons to contact us directly: first time assignment, establishing trust, etc., and we should be always prepared properly for this type of contact.

5. Social network ethics

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Social networking – although not considered professional yet – is most fashionable contact option at present. The advantages include file sharing (documents of all types), video contact and a rather valuable network of further possible contacts. This all-in-one option seemingly makes all the previous ones obsolete, except for the fact that the mid-generation and the older ones seem to be reluctant to accept the concept and use it (*Facebook*, *Twitter*, etc.).

Although *Facebook* has more than 1.3 billion users worldwide and there is the slogan "if you are not on Facebook, you don't exist"[1], we should not forget that it is not a professional association, after all. Many would mention here *LinkedIn*, which may be categorized as an in-between option for gathering professionals within a (social) network area.

Even if companies may want to take advantage of the possible clients on social networks, translators should not use it for cold contacting possible "friends". However, this problem leads us to the last section.

6. Cold contacting

Although marketing strategies encourage beginners to cold contact whenever and wherever possible (even if with a selected target), this may look like a desperate solution. Of course, a novice translator has to take advantage of all the possibilities of contacting potential clients, but this cannot go on for many years. We cannot agree that translators have to cold contact all their lives as this possibly hallmarks their quality. Keeping clients is a sign of professionalism, and we strongly believe that they will "spread the word", so translators are not constrained to cold contact for eternity.

Cold contacting may be carried on through all the possible contact channels mentioned in the previous sections and extremely many books and sites deal with the "know-how", including respectable ones in the field.[2]

In theory, the ethics of cold contacting is relatively simple: try not to be too aggressive, and make use of the advantage of the chosen contact option: text, voice, or appearance, and offer the possibility to get back to you through a variety of channels. Instead of a direct contact, our recommendation for the best cold contact is a convincing professional website, which was already designed having in mind potential clients. The website should be at least bilingual and in English (if this is not one of the two languages), for the search engines. The website should provide a professional resume in at least two languages, services, the equipment used (hardware and mainly software: operating system, text-editing, CAT-tools), referrals (if possible from respectable clients), samples from previous translations and rates applied. Of course, this may be completed with something unique, for instance useful links.[3]

7. Conclusions

In an age of distrust having been caused by the ways advertising and propaganda developed in the last century, contacting people has turned into a certain type of "know-how". The inventor of the consumerist culture, Edward Bernays, spread an infection that is mastered artfully in the present-day media: print, movies, television or cable news (West, 2012). When discussing the translator's responsibility, Kuhiwchak (2003, p. 116) states that "A truly professional translator needs to know languages, but also the social norms, reading habits, and stylistic preferences of the culture from which he takes, as well as of the one to which he

[1] http://courses.casmlab.org/snafall2012/if-youre-not-on-facebook-you-dont-exist/, 16. 01. 2015.
[2] http://www.forbes.com/sites/francesbridges/2013/08/01/how-to-write-a-cold-e-mail/, 16. 01. 2015.
[3] For instance: http://www.ssendelbach.com/index.html, http://zachar.jimdo.com/deutsch/, http://www.love2translate.com/ro/.

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contributes." We think that contact ethics may be also added to the list. To sum up, in our view professional translators have to build trust in a very severe environment, and a step-by-step application of contact ethics described above may be a solution.

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