



Choosing the right provider of interpreting services

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Vincent BUCK.

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A big multinational company convened a last-minute press conference in the run-up to a major product launch. The CEO chose to address the journalists in his native German, in an attempt to reach out to the German media that had been rumouring less than rosy prospects for the new product line. Interpretation into English was provided for the international press. Five minutes into the Q&A session that followed the CEO's address, English-speaking journalists were complaining that what they had heard through the interpreter was unintelligible.

An internal investigation later established what had gone wrong: The booth had been manned by a translator without much experience in simultaneous interpretation techniques. He had worked for slightly under two hours on his own. He had translated from German into English, neither of which was his native language. He had arrived in the booth with no idea of what the meeting was about. He had been hired on the strength of his CV by a simultaneous equipment rental company. The rental company's client was the posh hotel where the press conference was being held. The hotel had assured the professional meeting planner contracted to mastermind the event that they had a good record in arranging simultaneous interpretation services. The professional meeting planner had believed this and had concentrated on organising the press kits, the floral arrangements and hostesses instead...

A total of four intermediaries, plus a - by now very dissatisfied - client, had unfortunately failed to understand that, as far as the English-speaking press was concerned, the CEO's address would only be as good and convincing as the interpreters in the booth. None of them realised that bad interpretation is worse than no interpretation at all.



The above anecdote shows that selecting the right provider of conference services is the key to the credibility of your international meeting. This is especially the case if you have never worked with interpreters before. However, making the right choice is easier said than done.

Since the profession of conference interpreter is not legally recognised and protected in most countries, unfortunate though that may be for such a highly specialised activity, many people claim to be conference interpreters when they are anything but, and even more people maintain that they can arrange impeccable conference interpretation services. But is that true?

Providers of interpretation services usually belong to one the following categories, (listed below in alphabetical order):

- Convention centres,
- Equipment rental companies,
- Hotels,
- Individual interpreters,
- Interpretation agencies,
- Professional conference organisers (meeting planners),
- Translation agencies

It must be said that all of them can potentially offer excellent interpretation services, but most are in no position to provide the services or vouch for quality themselves. Accordingly, what they offer will only be as good as their sub-contractors. Let's take a closer look at who does what:

Convention centres are in the business of renting out meeting facilities. More often than not, these will include rooms with ISO-compliant built-in interpretation booths and equipment. Many reputable congress centres work in collaboration with one or more consultant interpreters or interpretation agencies to whom the recruitment of interpreters' teams for specific events is hived off.

Simultaneous equipment rental companies sell, rent and operate SI hardware. The bigger ones will even be able to provide the full range of audio-visual technology for large congresses, from barcos to voting systems. Of course, state-of-the-art SI equipment and proficient sound engineers are crucial to any event with simultaneous interpretation. Some rental companies will tell you that they can also provide the interpreters themselves, along with the equipment.

More and more **hotels** nowadays offer comprehensive meeting facilities, including built-in interpretation booths. Sadly enough, there are many examples of hotel booths laid out at



the whim of an architect who did not realise that the interpreters might one day need to stretch their legs under the table, or keep their meeting documents and laptop close at hand, or that looking at the projection screen through a pillar might prove slightly tricky. In most cases also, hotel booths have not been wired to a sound system, which means that a rental company has to come in with its own SI equipment whenever interpretation is required.

Whereas most **freelance interpreters** do not recruit teams of colleagues themselves, some have made a real speciality of it. In AIIC's jargon, they are called **consultant interpreters**. Some of them work in association with partners and have formed **companies** (interpretation agencies, interpreter cooperatives, partnerships, economic interest groups, etc.) Being interpreters themselves, they know how to compose quality teams, especially if they work with a large network of interpreters, such as those linked together world-wide through AIIC. Another advantage is that most of them offer totally transparent services: you will sign a contract with all the interpreters on the team, and a master contract with the consultant interpreter or company, so that you know exactly how much the interpreters and the recruiter get for their work.

Professional conference organisers, or event planners, are in the business of taking care of every aspect of any meeting, from a bar mitzvah to big fundraising events, including trade conferences and party conventions. They will sometimes offer interpretation services along with hotel bookings, attendee registration, hostesses and flowers.

Some **translation agencies** will claim that they are "the premier provider of a full range of interpretation services anywhere in the world" and that they manage a "world-wide network of thousands of tried and tested, competitively priced, professional conference interpreters speaking over two hundred languages". Well, for one thing, there simply aren't professionally trained, university-educated conference interpreters in 200 different languages, but 50 at the very most. And no organisation on the planet can boast a network of more than two hundred conference interpreters, except AIIC which gathers over 2500 members world-wide. So beware of overclaim if you deal with translation agencies. However, some of them do recognise that interpreting is not their core business, and will subcontract the recruitment of a team to a professional interpreter.

Whomever you decide to work with in the end, quality can only be guaranteed if a professional conference interpreter is putting the team together: Interpreters should be short-listed on the basis of their language combination, past experience, subject affinities, and availability. And even though the recruitment process can be considerably facilitated by customised software, having a big database and powerful software is not enough. The human touch remains all-important in a stress-prone profession where team-work in confined spaces is the name of the game. Knowing the interpreters personally and how



they work is essential, as is being able to draw on the resources of a world-wide network of reputable colleagues.

At any rate, to make sure that you are getting *real* value for money and to avoid putting your CEO or keynote speaker in an uncomfortable position at your next event, ask the following questions:

- Who is the provider and how do they recruit interpreters? Are they knowledgeable enough to hire interpreters themselves or will the task be hived off to someone else? If the latter is the case, how much commission does each of the intermediaries take?
- Does the provider have a good record in organising meetings with conference interpreters or is it something they do on the side?
- Who are the interpreters? Ask for the interpreter's references, CV, professional affiliation and language combination.
- Will you be allowed to liaise directly with the interpreters or the team leader before and during the meeting? Terminological preparation requires that the interpreters receive background documents, minutes of previous meetings and speeches well ahead of the event. Will the interpreters be able to contact you directly if they have specific questions? The more intermediaries between you and the interpreters, the more difficult that process becomes.
- Is the provider willing to explain its price? Ask for a detailed breakdown of prices for the SI equipment, the interpreters' fees and the consultancy fees. Whatever your vendor says, you can only know exactly how much the interpreters are really getting for their work if you sign an individual contract with them.

And never forget that, when the big day comes, your speakers will only sound as good and convincing as the interpreters in the booth.

Vincent Buck is a Brussels-based freelance conference interpreter. He was a member of AIIC's standing committee for the private market sector between 2000 and 2006.

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