

Jeff Williams

Unsung heroes of localization



More often than not, the news in the localization industry is about a new tool or application. Rarely does one hear anything about the thousands of people toiling behind the scenes who bring translation and localization projects to life. I'm talking about translators, project managers, engineers and sales/marketing people.

In the end, except for those companies actually engaged in selling tools and applications, the translation and localization industry is primarily a service industry, here to deliver projects on time and keep the clients satisfied so they will give us repeat business. As a service industry, we are ultimately dependent on people. This human factor, which is directly responsible for the customer service experience and the ultimate success of the localized product, has been characterized as a commodity. Why? Because it's intangible and an easy target, and a change in the industry some time ago allowed this classification and perception to perpetuate.

In order to nurture the delicate bond between language and commerce, the localization industry itself needs to recognize and encourage the people behind the scenes. These interactions are vital on a social and political level, but also have their direct impact and implications on global commerce. Clients also need to acknowledge this bond and realize that it adds at least as much value to their ultimate global success as their packaging and marketing efforts. Certainly, corporations need to develop new products and services, and because of market saturation, they need new localities in which to sell them. This may be more crucial than ever before, especially for Western, developed countries where the economic recovery has been sluggish, to put it mildly. Companies in the West need to be looking at the global marketplace not sometime in the future but now, today!

It's a well-known fact that people prefer to do business in their own language. This is good news for the translation and localization industry, which will become more important and relevant to practically every other type of industry that wants to be successful in the next decade. While the localization industry welcomes this infusion of new business and potential, let's keep in mind all of the people working like the Wizard of Oz, performing magic behind the curtain. Consumers the world over have little idea what it takes to introduce a new product or service to an international market. When that

product sits on the shelf or online, it conveys the correct message and contains images and artwork we are familiar and comfortable with. We take it for granted that it will say what it needs to say and will look and feel recognizable, whether we're in the Moscow in Idaho or Russia.

How does a product developed in the United States get the look and feel of a culture as different from ours as say, Saudi Arabia? The answer, of course, is localization, which plays a crucial role in a product's success. However, what no one outside our industry ever sees is the solitary translator burning the midnight oil in Guatemala; or the engineer pulling an all-nighter to meet a client's deadline; or the project manager juggling 60 different resources for one project and getting up at 2:00 AM to place a call to his or her resource in China. I know these instances are not particular to our industry, but they're not as familiar to everyone as the sight of a salesperson on a red-eye flight from California to New York for an early morning meeting. Many people in our industry, especially the translators, labor alone with no boss to keep them on track, typically no benefits or bonuses to spur them on, and no co-workers to call on for support. They simply rely on their own standards and conscientiousness to get the job done. Unlike many industries, there are no assembly lines in localization and very little replication from one project to the next. To be sure, we use all sorts of tools and programs to get the job done, but localization is and will remain a customized and largely human function.

The next time you see an HP printer or Canon digital camera for sale in Europe, stop for a minute and think about exactly how many people's expertise it took to bring that product to the store shelves. Ask yourself if that product would be as competitive if the localization had not been done or was done poorly. The answer is no, and the reason it's there and selling successfully is all the seasoned and dedicated localization professionals who worked long, intense hours to finish the job and get it right. We need to continue to invest in and foster these unsung heroes who keep the localization top spinning. **M**

Jeff Williams, director of marketing and sales for PTIGlobal in Portland, Oregon, is an 11-year veteran in the localization industry.

To offer your own Takeaway on a language-industry issue, send a contribution to editor@multilingual.com