

Healthcare Reform Deadlines – Are You Ready to Speak Your Customer’s Language?

By George Rimalower and Michael Bearden, ISI Translation Services

Phrases like “Grandfathered Health Plan” or “Biosimilar Biological Products” are hard enough to understand in English, let alone trying to accurately translate those concepts into Spanish, Chinese or any other of the dozens of languages in which healthcare providers and organizations must communicate.

But thanks to the [Affordable Care Act](#) deadlines are looming... and shifting. One such deadline was set for July 1, but now may have been extended by a few months. It calls for healthcare providers to tell their patients that there are changes taking place, and if a member so chooses, to make a number of vital documents and health-related information available in his/her primary language.

But whether the deadline is July or January there are two things we know for certain:

- There will be an increase in the amount of information that must be translated; and
- There is a potential for a significant increase in the number of different languages healthcare providers and organizations need to accommodate.

Following are tips on how healthcare companies can prepare for this potential onslaught of translation requests.

Assess your current translation activities to anticipate increased needs.

Your language services partner is your best friend when it comes to spotting existing or upcoming trends in your own translation needs. Ask your language partners what kind of data they can give you.

Ask for all translation-related statistics for as many years as available, including:

- List of all languages requested by region, state, county and city
- Number of words translated into each language, by year
- Average turn-around time for projects
- Average size of projects
- Spikes in volume – get stats on when they’ve occurred in the past, size and scope, and the languages that accompany these spikes
- Any other stats that will be helpful in understanding how you’ve been using language services, and how the demand for languages has evolved over time.

Also ask your partner if it's possible to get a snapshot of these stats across all of their healthcare clients (with no proprietary information shared, of course), so you can spot trends across the market as a whole.

Be proactive in your planning. Don't just consider the projects and languages you already know you need, but anticipate how those needs might evolve over the next year or two. Every company and every situation is different, so there aren't boilerplate formulas to apply to get an easy answer.

The key is to be in constant communication with your language services provider. If you don't already have a personal relationship with someone there, get one.

Anticipate what new languages might be requested from your customer base.

A few steps are helpful here – consult the 2010 U.S. Census data, since it's fresh; and keep an eye on global events that might affect immigration trends.

First, the Census: We recommend people do some investigating around the U.S. Census website, at www.census.gov. This [link](#) takes you to a report that looks at our nation's changing racial and ethnic diversity. At this [link](#) you'll find some information about Illinois in particular.

For city-level detail, it's sometimes helpful to see how the major daily newspaper is reporting the data. According to this summary by the [Chicago Tribune](#), Latinos and Asians accounted for the Chicago area's biggest population increases during the 2000s.

As quoted [here](#), "In Chicago, the [total] population dropped 7 percent and the Asian-American population rose 17 percent." So, in the Chicago area, providers might investigate which Asian languages are more prevalent for their particular customers and which language requests are on the rise.

But beyond the Census data, it makes sense to keep an eye on what's going on around the world. For example, the tragedy in Japan might bring about an increase in Japanese refugees, which in turn might result in shifting language trends here in the States. We saw similar patterns in the 1980s with El Salvador, Guatemala, Russia and Armenia.

Write materials that are ready for translation.

That clever play on words, that intricate, fully packed sentence, that timely reference to an upcoming national holiday... all those things that make your document interesting and informative in English will be the very things that make your message misunderstood in any other language.

There are steps you can take when drafting the original material to make the translation process more efficient and, therefore, successful (read: easier, faster and more accurate).

For example: the biggest challenge in successful translation? Inaccurate, confusing or sub-par writing to begin with. Typos and incorrect punctuation can alter the meaning of a sentence. When writing is ambiguous, the translator has to decipher what the writer is trying to say.

Another common pitfall: a failure to realize that other languages use more words than English. A translated document can be 25 to 35 percent longer, which can cause problems and delays when the text has to fit into an already-designed brochure.

Other factors that can compromise a company's ability to communicate effectively and consistently:

- Misrepresentation of numbers and dates – 1,107.61 in the United States would be written as 1.107,61 in Latin American Spanish. Likewise, 6/3/11 is June 3rd here in the US, but represents the 6th of March in Spanish-speaking countries.
- A misleading use of color as shorthand – while red conveys a sense of danger or alarm to North American English speakers, the color represents a sense of happiness or good luck to other cultural groups.
- Material written for literary and education levels too high for the intended audience.
- References that offend or confuse based on cultural and religious sensitivities.

No two translation services companies are alike. With so much at stake and so much potential for error, ask your language partner about quality control processes. How many people “touch” each document? What is their training? Are they experts in the languages AND in medical terminology? How many rounds of editing and proofreading are conducted? Make sure you're comfortable and confident in their attention to detail.

Don't let new translation requirements take you by surprise. With a little preparation, you can be ready to communicate even phrases like “Value-Based Purchasing,” “COBRA” and “Medical Loss Ratio” in just about any language.