



ISSUE BRIEF VOL. 1, NO. 3

This ongoing series provides information on how to develop programs to educate Medicare beneficiaries and their families. Additional information about this and other projects is available on the Center for Medicare Education's Web site: www.MedicareEd.org.

Translating Materials for Non-English Speaking Audiences

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief provides basic "how to" information for translating written materials into languages other than English. Additional information and sample materials can be found on the Center for Medicare Education Web site.

Producing a translated document of high quality requires commitment and planning. It can be complex, expensive and time consuming, and is often politically sensitive, especially if you are not a community-based provider of the same ethnic and cultural background as your target audience. There are no easy solutions to many of these challenges, but it is important to think things through and to make informed decisions. Assess your financial and staff resources and time frame. Then be creative in your approach to finding resources and working with your target community.

Here are some of the issues you may face:

- ***What are the ramifications of translating the material?***
Will it result in additional requests for assistance that your organization cannot fulfill and leave people feeling frustrated? How can you meet the need for bilingual hotlines and workshops? Can you raise funds to support these efforts?
- ***Do you have the resources to produce a high quality translation?***
Inaccurate or poorly written information can be worse than no information at all. Are you producing something that will help those you are trying to reach?
- ***Can you afford to translate and produce the entire document in another language?***
While it is better to produce a high-quality abridged piece than a poor quality longer one, will your target audience feel short-changed at not receiving the same material as English speakers?
- ***How do you partner with community-based groups on translation activities?***
If you have a limited budget, what is the best way to partner with others to gain the benefit of their expertise while respecting that they are providing a service and need to cover their costs?

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Step One: Knowing Your Target Audience

You can't write until you know your audience. Speak to some of the older people you want to reach, their family members, their service providers. Convene a task force or focus group, or meet people individually. Consider their communication habits and cultural preferences.

READING PROFICIENCY—People may speak a language, but not read it well, especially if the subject is unfamiliar or complex. If your audience members have trouble reading English, but read their native language, then translate the material. If they also have limited reading ability in their native language, you may have more success reaching them through radio, television, workshops or a hot line.

COMFORT LEVEL AND COMMUNICATION HABITS—Your audience may read English but still prefer their native language. If they are not comfortable with English and do not understand the importance of the material, they are unlikely to read it. In such cases, translate the material. Ask specific questions to gauge language preferences:

Do you get your information from English newspapers or non-English newspapers?

Do you “think” in English? When you read or hear something in English, do you understand it in English, or do you translate it in your mind into another language?

Can you understand complex or technical information in English, or would you rather read and talk about it in your native language?

COMMUNICATION WITH CAREGIVERS, FAMILY AND FRIENDS—To whom does your target audience turn for help and advice? Do these people read the language of the target audience? If not, produce a side-by-side translation, with the English text next to the other language in a single document. This way, they can read, review and discuss the material together.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES—How will your audience react to what you are saying? How is this type of information handled in their culture? What tone and type of language are used to discuss the issues you are presenting?

DIVERSITY WITHIN THE TARGET AUDIENCE—Are you targeting a single ethnic/cultural group, or are there sub-groups? Cuban Spanish is not the same as Mexican Spanish. Even between regions of the same country, there can be different dialects. If your audience is diverse, develop material for each sub-group, or create a document generic enough to be understood by all.

Translating is a team effort, but someone has to be in charge to make sure things get done, and done on time. Designate one person to work with the other organizations, work with the translator throughout the process, coordinate the test marketing phase, and see the piece through layout, printing and dissemination.

Step Two: Partnering with Others

If a sizable population requires materials in another language, then a translation plan should be part of the overall plan for your organization. One of the best ways to understand the needs of different ethnic and cultural groups, and to ensure you will reach them with your material, is to work with members of the target audience and the agencies that serve them. Community organizations are often eager to collaborate, but may resent being brought in at the last minute as a source of free translation or asked to join a “partnership” in which they are not really asked to contribute their ideas and expertise.

Build translation into your work plan and budget from the beginning. Start forging collaborative relationships before you start the translation process. Community partners can help you:

- Apply for joint funding, with a portion going to the partners for their work on the project;
- Identify members of the target audience who can familiarize you with cultural and language issues;
- Identify translators (possibly their own staff members);
- Conduct the test marketing;
- Disseminate the material to your target audience and
- Provide follow-up services, such as hot lines and workshops, in the target audience's primary language.

If you cannot make these organizations fully funded partners in the project, try developing an arrangement to trade services. For example, if a group translates and test markets the material, you can offer them:

- Free copies to distribute to their clients;
- Workshops for their clients and the community;
- Staff training;
- Articles on Medicare for their newsletter and
- Client referrals.

Step Three: Hiring a Translator

“We never spend enough time finding the right translator.”

You may not be able to find, or afford, the “perfect” person, but you should find the best person (or people) within your constraints.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A TRANSLATOR

Look for someone who:

- Is fully bilingual, in written and spoken forms (able to convert simple and complex thoughts into the other language, at the level of your audience);
- Is bicultural—ideally, a native speaker who understands how your audience communicates on a daily basis;
- Knows the subject area;
- Has written translations for the target population before;
- Will provide samples of earlier work (Have these reviewed for the quality and the literacy level you seek);
- Communicates and works well with groups, especially seniors (crucial during test marketing) and
- Has references attesting to experience and reliability.

When translating into a language that uses another alphabet, such as Russian or Chinese, be sure your translator is familiar with and has access to computer software that produces these characters. You want a complete, typed final product, not a handwritten version.

POTENTIAL TRANSLATORS

When looking for a translator consider:

- Staff members or volunteers in your organization;
- Staff from social service agencies, community-based organizations, hospitals, community health centers and other health-care providers;
- Reporters for foreign language newspapers and radio stations;
- Faculty or graduate students in the foreign language departments of local schools (Be sure they can write at an appropriate level, and be aware that these sources can be expensive. You might request a draft translation and have someone who speaks the everyday language revise and complete the project.) and
- Translation companies. (Though reliable, their cost—often between \$35 and \$45 per 100 English words, or more—may be prohibitive.)

WORKING WITH YOUR TRANSLATOR

Share information with the translator, including:

- A clear explanation of your message;
- An accurate portrait of your target audience;
- A sample or description of the writing style you want (e.g., a formal or informal “feel” to the material) and
- The schedule the translator is expected to meet.

Select your translator early, while you are drafting the English text. Your translator can help clarify the message and help you avoid idioms that will be difficult to translate.

WHAT ABOUT COMPUTERIZED TRANSLATION SOFTWARE?

These programs are not reliable. They perform literal translations and do not accurately relay the meaning or nuances of complex topics like Medicare. And the more sophisticated programs can cost many hundreds of dollars. At best, this software can provide an initial translation from which to work.

Step Four: Translating the Material

“Use the language of the people you want to reach. In our area, Medicare is often called “the red, white and blue card,” and SSI is “old people’s money,” so that’s what we use in our materials, because our audience understands it.”

Translating materials about Medicare is a special challenge, because of the many health-care terms and acronyms involved. Do not look for a word-for-word, literal translation—your information and overall message should be accurate but presented so that your target audience will respond to it.

Here are some tips for the translation process:

- Use simple, easily understood vocabulary
- Translate a small part of the material, and test it on bilingual staff or clients to see that it works
- Proofread everything—typos and bad grammar are a problem in any language
- The translated version may be a different length than the English and may require a different number of pages and format to look good and be easy to read
- Consider your audience’s preferences for color and presentation style, the types of photographs and symbols they favor, the best size and shape for your finished product. Your advisory group can help you with this.

Step Five: Test Marketing

Test marketing helps ensure that the material you have developed:

- 1) conveys the information you want it to;
- 2) is understandable to those you are trying to reach and
- 3) is culturally accessible to your target audience.

“The first time we translated something, we had a staff member’s friend do it, because he spoke the language; it didn’t work out. Three reviewers had three completely different views on what the translated piece actually said. Since our staff did not speak the language, we couldn’t judge it for ourselves.”

At very least, any translation project should include feedback from people who speak the language at the level of your audience and are of the same ethnic and cultural background. Use reviewers who are not familiar with the subject matter, to ensure it will be understood by the public. Use this feedback to revise the material before printing and distribution.

The test marketing plan presented here is comprehensive and may be beyond your organization’s resources. Use it as a reference tool, incorporating as many steps as possible.

CREATE AN ADVISORY GROUP—to review and comment on the translated material. Do not include those who helped develop the materials because they are too familiar with it. The advisory group can include:

- Seniors from the community;
- People who work with these seniors;
- Health and social service professionals who work with your audience around the issues you are discussing and
- Family, friends and others who help seniors get information and make decisions.

TEST THE MATERIAL—

- Give each advisor both the English version and the translation. Allow time for them to review it and, if appropriate, to show it to people they work with (other professionals or clients);
- Ask an advisor to translate the material from the foreign language back into English. Compare this with the original English for accuracy and tone and
- Get written responses to the text to keep track of the corrections and suggestions. Conduct a focus group or

conference call to get reactions to the translation, with the translator participating if possible.

INCORPORATE COMMENTS—Allow the translator time to make revisions based on the advisory group’s feedback.

TEST THE REVISIONS—Repeat the process until everyone is comfortable that the content and message are clearly articulated in an appropriate way for the target audience.

Have a flexible time line—there’s always a delay somewhere, and it always takes longer than you expect.

Step Six: Disseminating the Material

Many translation projects fail because, although the translated material is good, it never reaches its intended audience. Build a distribution plan into your budget and time line, and begin this process early enough to get your material out in a timely fashion.

Publicize and distribute your materials through:

- Community-based organizations that work with your target audience
- Individual healthcare and social service providers
- Organizations for veterans from other countries
- Stores and services in the community that cater to those you are trying to reach, such as: markets, libraries, churches/synagogues, community centers, restaurants, video stores and banks
- Foreign language newspapers:
 - Establish a relationship or buy advertisements
 - Ask them to run articles/press releases on your organization and publication
- Foreign language cable television and radio shows:
 - Get on the “events calendar”
 - Be a guest on a talk or “viewer call-in” show and promote the availability of your publication



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