

GOING GLOBAL

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

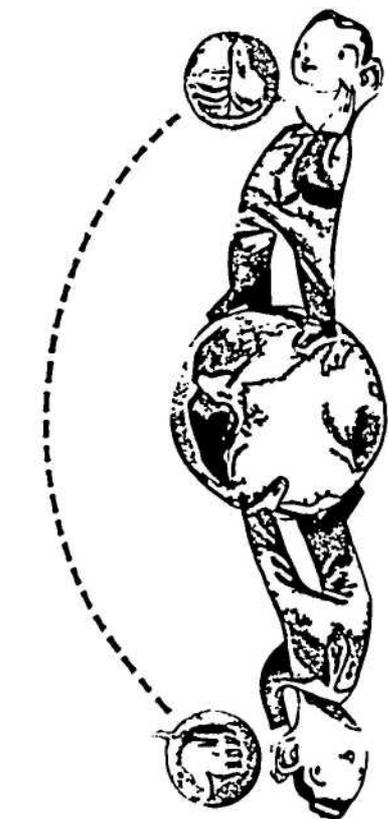
When doing business overseas, the right translator can make all the difference

GERMANY LOOKED LIKE a promising new market for Interactive Magic. The North Carolina software company had rolled out several successful computer games there, and executives expected its newest release, "Capitalism," to be its most popular yet. There was just one problem: When "Capitalism" hit the shelves, the game's instruction manual advised users to access a nail file to get the software running. It turns out that in the hands of Interactive Magic's new translation firm, the word *file* lost its electronic meaning and instead became a beauty accessory. "We were the laughingstock of the gaming community," recalls president Robert Pickens.

The "Capitalism" debacle taught Pickens (who has since left the company) an important lesson about capitalism itself. Globalization and the Web make it easier than ever to connect with customers overseas. But while most globally minded entrepreneurs painstakingly attend to letters of credit and currency fluctuations, few pay much attention to something far more basic—the language barrier.

Finding the right translator is no simple task. The \$7.8 billion translation industry is famously fragmented, with virtually no barriers to entry. A "translation company" can be anything from a single college student to a sophisticated enterprise with high-tech tools and certified specialists. Figuring out how to choose among the multitudes is almost as hard as learning a foreign language yourself.

Just ask James Segil. The president of Los Angeles-based Knowledge Base Solutions recently had a customer request his software in Dutch, Chinese, and seven other languages. The technical problems were easy. Finding a translator was another matter. An Internet query resulted in nearly 400 offers from all over the world. "My in box overflowed," Segil says. He was re-



lied to find a contractor right in his own building. At least, Segil figured, he'd know where to turn if things went awry.

Segil was lucky: He had chosen a solid, full-service vendor. Such companies will translate, edit, and proofread your material, and gather it all into the proper format, usually for between 20¢ and 30¢ a word. At that price, a *New York Times* front-page

article in French runs about \$200, and a 100-page legal contract about \$8,000.

You might be tempted to save by using translation software or even a bilingual employee. That's not a bad idea if all you want is to grasp the crude essence of something—"If you don't know whether a piece of paper is a sandwich order or a lease agreement," says Thomas L. West III, president of the American Translators Association. But beware, West warns. "I know a lawyer who received a fax from his Latin American subsidiary and gave it to his Spanish-speaking secretary," he says. "Three words stood out: *celebración, reunión, and social*. 'Relax, they're just having a party,' she said. He later learned it was an invitation to a shareholders meeting."

For small, single-language projects, you'd do better finding a freelancer. Independent contractors won't provide the full range of editing services, but they can get the job done for as little as 10¢ a word. Your translator's native tongue should be the target language and the translator's expertise should match that of the original author's. In other words, if you're looking to translate rocket science into Spanish, hire a native Latin American with a Ph.D. in physics.

A good place to start your search—whether you need a newsletter in Gaelic, or your complete HR policy in 20 languages—is the website of the American Translators Association (www.atanet.org). It has a directory of 240 companies and almost 5,000 independent contractors. A few phone calls and some thorough questions should pave the way for a smooth appearance on the global stage. Anton Pièch

Lost in the Translation Even the best-laid business plans can be botched by a careless translator. Here's how some of America's biggest companies have managed to mess things up:

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| KENTUCKY FRIED CHICKEN | ENGLISH: "Finger lickin' good." | CHINESE: "Eat your fingers off." |
| ADOLPH COORS CO. | ENGLISH: "Turn it loose." | SPANISH: "Drink Coors and get diarrhea." |
| OTIS ENGINEERING CORP. | ENGLISH: "Completion equipment." | RUSSIAN: "Equipment for orgasms." |
| PARKER PEN CO. | ENGLISH: "Avoid embarrassment." | SPANISH: "Avoid pregnancy." |
| PERDUE FARMS INC. | ENGLISH: "It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken." | SPANISH: "It takes a sexually excited man to make a chick affectionate." |