

# **Translation Whitepaper**

**Finding the right solutions  
to your company's needs**

by Matthew Held  
Principal  
MH TransConsult, LLC

October 2010  
Version 1.2

**Table of Contents**

Purpose .....3  
What is translation? .....3  
What makes a good translator? .....3  
The structure of the translation industry.....5  
When to work with a translation agency .....5  
How freelance translators fit in .....6  
What about free translation websites? .....6  
The role of specialized translation firms.....7  
How we can help .....8  
Our approach to business.....8  
    Communication with your German colleagues.....8  
    Communication with your customers .....10  
Summary .....10

**MH TransConsult, LLC**  
433 Linton Hill Rd.  
Newtown, PA 18940  
United States

[www.mh-transconsult.com](http://www.mh-transconsult.com)

## Purpose

The purpose of this whitepaper is to provide companies and individuals with the information they need to make the best choices for fulfillment of their translation requirements.

## What is translation?

As a general term, “translation” describes the activity of converting a written message from one language to another. “Interpretation” is another common term used in this context, but should be reserved for verbal communication.

## What makes a good translator?

When translating a written message from one language to another, a translator performs two essential activities: 1) understanding of the foreign language and 2) *writing* in the translator’s native language. We stress *writing* because translators are in fact professional writers. The products they deliver to their clients are written documents. Of course, all translators must be proficient in a foreign language. But the most skilled translators also have strong writing ability in their native language, i.e. the language they learned as a child and grew up speaking.

One way to describe the habits of good translators is to explain what they do not do: They do not robotically replace the words of one language with those of another. Good translators read and understand the source language and then express the author’s message in a way that meets the expectations of readers of the target language. A good translator must have the experience and confidence he needs to employ the appropriate writing style. Ultimately, the objective of translation is to accurately convey the author’s intended message, not to mimic the stylistic and grammatical structure of the source text. Therefore, good translators habitually avoid so-called “direct” translations, opting instead to express all aspects of the author’s message in a way a native user of the target language would naturally write. When this is done successfully, the translation will be a pleasure to read and easy to understand.

German **operating instructions** provide a good example of this. These documents are commonly written with a strong reliance on

**MH TransConsult, LLC**  
433 Linton Hill Rd.  
Newtown, PA 18940  
United States

[www.mh-transconsult.com](http://www.mh-transconsult.com)

the passive voice, i.e. “something is done by somebody”, as opposed to the active voice, i.e. “somebody does something”. German operating instructions for any type of industrial machine may contain the instruction: “*Zum Stoppen der Anlage wird der Schalter in die Position OFF gestellt.*” A possible direct translation would be: “To stop the machine, the switch is put into the position OFF.” But is this how operating instructions are written in English? Actually not. An American writing such a document would be more likely to write: “To stop the machine, move the switch to the OFF position.” That is, English-language operating instructions tell the reader *what to do*, whereas German operating instructions commonly describe *how* something is accomplished. Experienced translators know the difference and utilize the proper style in their work.

Proper style is just as critical (although for different reasons) for the translation of **press releases** and **marketing materials** like websites and product catalogs. For obvious reasons, corporations spend a great deal of time and effort to make sure that their PR and marketing materials express precisely what the company wishes to communicate. These activities are often performed (or at least supervised) by senior managers because they understand the company’s products, culture, and customers better than others and because they have ultimate responsibility for official communications. Before a press release or catalog can be published, it normally must be approved by high-level managers, if not the CEO or President. The reasons for this are clear: such documents are official statements that will be in the public eye for an extended period of time. Anything that is released publicly must be as close to perfect as possible.

So why would a company spend so much time and effort to write, edit, and approve press releases and marketing materials just to hand off their work to a translator of unknown abilities? Judging by the low quality of many foreign companies’ English-language marketing materials, translation is treated more like an afterthought than an integral part of the communication process.

Here’s **how to fix this situation**: Cultivate a relationship with an experienced translator; make sure that he or she gains a relatively thorough understanding of your company’s culture, products, and

**MH TransConsult, LLC**  
433 Linton Hill Rd.  
Newtown, PA 18940  
United States

[www.mh-transconsult.com](http://www.mh-transconsult.com)

general strategy; encourage the translator to ask questions; and – very important – find someone at your company who is capable of evaluating the accuracy and style of the translator’s work. If you work at the American subsidiary of a German company, find an American within your organization who has a strong understanding of your products as well as the critical reading skills needed to evaluate your translator’s writing style. It is not necessary for this person to understand the original text. Their job is to proofread the quality of the English! To do this, the person should have the discipline to carefully proofread every translation for run-on sentences, inconsistencies, missing facts, inappropriate usage, and overly complex phraseology. Your PR and marketing materials should be easy to read quickly. No one outside your firm will have the patience to read and re-read your materials. They will simply stop reading.

### **The structure of the translation industry**

The translation industry is very decentralized, with few large players. The main categories of translation service providers are translation agencies, freelance translators, and specialized translation providers like MH TransConsult, LLC.

### **When to work with a translation agency**

If your company uses multiple languages or if you would like to have your material translated into several different languages, you will probably be best served by a good translation agency. These companies maintain contacts with translators throughout the world. If, for example, you would like to have operating instructions for your product translated into Spanish, Italian, English, and French, your best course of action would be to give the material to one agency capable of handling those languages. They would take care of logistics and work directly with a different translator for each language. You benefit by having a single contact who is responsible for managing the entire project. Or, if you have a large-volume, one-time project, i.e. several hundred pages or more, a well-established translation agency should have the capacity to meet your deadline (by dividing the work among several translators). If either of these scenarios sounds familiar, feel free to contact MH TransConsult and we will be happy to recommend a translation

**MH TransConsult, LLC**  
433 Linton Hill Rd.  
Newtown, PA 18940  
United States

[www.mh-transconsult.com](http://www.mh-transconsult.com)

agency or give you pointers on finding the agency that is right for you.

## **How freelance translators fit in**

Freelance translators are independent contractors. Most freelancers obtain a large portion of their assignments through translation agencies who contract them on a per-job basis. Freelance translators normally specialize in one foreign language. Companies that choose to work with freelance translators can benefit from having direct contact with the person translating their material (as opposed to working through a translation agency). The prices charged by freelancers are often less than prices from translation agencies.

But, it is important to consider that a freelance translator may be unable to provide the same level of service as a well-established translation agency. For example, when a freelance translator takes a vacation, he or she will generally be unable to perform translation work.

A freelance translator's areas of specialty is an important factor, but one that must be considered in view of his or her overall skills and experience. For example, if your firm manufactures a highly specialized product, it would be ideal to find a translator with expertise in your particular field. But, if given a choice between an inexperienced translator who has knowledge of your products or an experienced translator with more broad technical knowledge, your safest choice will probably be the experienced translator. Experienced translators will have exposure to a wide range of subjects within their general field (for example: mechanical engineering, software, or biotechnology) and will be skilled at researching terminology for new areas. Finding a translator with knowledge of your exact subject matter may be impossible. Or, if you happen to find such a translator, that person may not possess the writing skills needed to produce clear, easily understood material.

## **What about free translation websites?**

One of the many interesting services available from Google™ and other Internet portals are free translation tools. These sites will

**MH TransConsult, LLC**  
433 Linton Hill Rd.  
Newtown, PA 18940  
United States

[www.mh-transconsult.com](http://www.mh-transconsult.com)

quickly translate any type of material between any two languages. But are the results good enough? The answer depends entirely on your expectations. Never use these services for any material you plan to release publicly or for communication with business partners. The results will never be completely accurate or even entirely understandable. Computers can easily replace one word or phrase with another, but they are unable to mimic the two interrelated activities involved in effective translation (refer to section “What makes a good translator?”).

However, if you have a foreign-language text and simply would like to know what the text is about, then you will probably find these free services to be worthwhile. The language quality and accuracy will always be sub-standard but they will probably be good enough for you to discover the general content. Consider using these services as a way to determine whether professional translation services will be worthwhile for a given text.

## **The role of specialized translation firms**

If your company uses only two primary languages, you can benefit from working with a specialized translation firm like MH TransConsult. The most common example of this is a manufacturing or service company with headquarters in one country and a major subsidiary in another. For instance: In the United States, there are many German-owned companies. These companies typically design and manufacture their products at a German headquarters with anywhere from 50 to 500 employees. The American subsidiary may be responsible for sales and service of products manufactured in Germany, or may even manufacture some products itself. These companies often need to have written materials such as press releases, operating instructions, or internal communication translated between German and English only. If this sounds like your situation, you will be well-served by choosing an independent translator or a translation firm that specializes in your language.

MH TransConsult specializes in serving companies that require translation between German and English. Principal translator Matthew Held has more than ten years experience working with German companies and their American subsidiaries. He also has

**MH TransConsult, LLC**  
433 Linton Hill Rd.  
Newtown, PA 18940  
United States

[www.mh-transconsult.com](http://www.mh-transconsult.com)

direct work experience at the American subsidiary of a German manufacturing firm and therefore understands the challenges of maintaining effective channels of communication.

## **How we can help**

Matthew Held of MH TransConsult specializes in German-to-English translation. All German to English assignments are performed in-house by Matthew Held.

When our clients require translation of English into German, we assign the job to one of several trusted German native speakers and professional translators. We then proofread the German translation before delivery. In this way, we function like a specialized translation agency and are able to handle virtually all German <> English translation requirements.

## **Our approach to business**

Our approach to business is to establish long-term relationships with our customers. We focus on serving German-owned corporations that have subsidiaries in the United States. As described above, these companies typically have research, manufacturing, sales, and service operations divided between Germany and the United States.

Our role as your translation service provider is to facilitate communication among three key parties:

- the German headquarters
- the American subsidiary and
- your company's American customers.

### ***Communication with your German colleagues***

At this point we will assume that you are an employee of a German-owned corporation in the United States. You may be working in management, sales, or service. It doesn't really matter. What does matter is that you have German colleagues and occasionally experience a language barrier. We can help!

If you communicate regularly with your German headquarters, you will most likely be dealing with a few individuals who are

**MH TransConsult, LLC**  
433 Linton Hill Rd.  
Newtown, PA 18940  
United States

[www.mh-transconsult.com](http://www.mh-transconsult.com)

comfortable using English, possibly in the Export or Sales departments. As a result, you may experience a bottleneck of communication between headquarters and your subsidiary as one or two individuals attempt to facilitate the flow of information for the entire company. If key individuals in the sales, service, accounting, or R&D departments are unable to communicate directly, this can be a major drag on your company's development. Having a working relationship with a specialized translation firm like MH TransConsult or a freelance translator can reduce or even eliminate these types of challenges. Instead of channeling communications between a few people who happen to share a common language, key personnel will be able to communicate directly with their German counterparts.

The second form of internal communication are written reports, such as notices of change, technical product specifications, service directives, sales strategies, marketing reports, competitor analyses, and many others. At German-owned corporations, these types of reports are often prepared at headquarters in Germany — in German of course. Unfortunately, American subsidiaries frequently miss out on important internal information simply due to the language barrier. This can be easily resolved by working with a specialized translation firm that can translate this material into English. This way, the American employees stay up-to-date on developments at the German parent company.

Third, American subsidiaries often discover that the specifications of German-developed products do not precisely match the needs of American customers. As a result, products that are successful in the German or European market often require adaptations to be equally successful in the American market. A specialized translation and consulting firm like MH TransConsult, LLC can provide the language services needed to facilitate ongoing communication regarding product specifications and developments. In these situations, working directly with a specialized translation firm or freelance translator can be very beneficial because the translator will essentially become part of your internal organization. Over time he will become familiar with internal terminology and establish working relationships with key personnel. In summary, your company will experience almost all of the benefits of having an in-

**MH TransConsult, LLC**  
433 Linton Hill Rd.  
Newtown, PA 18940  
United States

[www.mh-transconsult.com](http://www.mh-transconsult.com)

house translator without the expenses of a full-time salary and benefits.

***Communication with your customers***

If you work at a German-American corporation that publishes press releases, product brochures, catalogs, or regularly updates its Website, a specialized translation firm like MH TransConsult can provide direct translation services as you need them. You may have already encountered problems getting translations that are both accurate and a pleasure to read. This is a common problem when the person assigned to translate (or write) your public relations material is not a product expert. On the other hand, the people at your company with loads of product knowledge are not necessarily skilled writers. The solution to this dilemma is to find a professional translator who has enough product knowledge to write promotional material that is easy to read, compelling, and accurate. Translator Matthew Held at MH TransConsult takes the time necessary to understand the products, services, and customers of each of his clients. The results are a unique combination of professional writing style and inside expertise.

**Summary**

Translation is the process of converting a written message from one language to another. Good translators are proficient in a foreign language and excellent writers in their native language. Translators should always translate into their native language. Translation agencies are a good choice if your company works with multiple languages. Freelance translators can often provide the services you need at reasonable prices, but may be unable to provide a high level of service. A specialized translation firm like MH TransConsult focuses on one language combination, such as German/English and can facilitate effective communication among three key parties: corporate headquarters, an international subsidiary, and the client's customers. In addition to accuracy, writing style is a very important aspect of high quality translation services.

**MH TransConsult, LLC**  
433 Linton Hill Rd.  
Newtown, PA 18940  
United States

[www.mh-transconsult.com](http://www.mh-transconsult.com)