

# **Getting from Tier Two to Tier One in Japanese-to-English Translation**

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William Lise  
Kirameki Translations, Inc.**

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## Taking Notes?

- **I might be going pretty quickly.**
- **The presentation, including my notes (basically this talk), will be made available online in at least two places.**

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- I find that some speakers at these events, particularly lately, just make a Powerpoint presentation with very sketchy slides (and slides, of course, should be sketchy) and then later provide only those sketchy slides, which are not very useful.
- Other speakers cram all their content into their slides, often rendering them illegible.
- For that reason, in addition to my slides, I am disclosing my notes—essentially what my talk was, perhaps only slightly redacted at the places where I might have named names.

## Some Caveats

- **Preaching to the choir.**
- **Some things I say might sound like I'm attacking your belief system with regard to pursuing a translation career.**

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- There is great diversity among translators in terms of their experience, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Avoiding telling some people what they already know is impossible. Apologies in advance.
- Disruption has become an overused buzzword, but let me suggest that I might try to disrupt your belief system. If I've done that, I might have achieved one of my goals today.

## Some More Caveats

- I'll be talking about *commercial* translation,
- not translation of Buddhism, the tea ceremony, flower arranging, Japanese history, literature, or many other fields that are not “commercial.”

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- You might be interested in those fields, and you might find some work that produces income. But the number of people able to make a living from those fields, compared to commercial translators, is extremely small.

## Some Context

- **Where have I been?—in Japan for the past four-plus decades.**
- **Ex-geek (electrical engineer) in the real world.**
- **Have never worked in translation as anything but a tier-one translator.**

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- The last 42-plus years in Japan. Before that, I worked in a fiber optics lab. Before that, I was a Russian-language spook for the US Navy, riding on a variety of intelligence-gathering platforms. That was the only time I have visited Australia (Perth and Adelaide in 1968).
- For a few years at the beginning my current life in Japan, I established and headed the Japan branch of a US manufacturer of electronic measuring equipment. I was arguably an “expat,” but without living in Nishi-Azabu, having an imported maid, and most other perks often enjoyed by “real” expats.
- I have been a translator and interpreter for all the years after that period, and actually even during the end of my branch manager days, when I was selling translation services to customers for my measuring instrument products (and later to competitors).
- I have for many years run a tiny company that serves translation **consumers**, including Japanese manufacturers and law firms, US law firms, and more recently an occasional overseas manufacturer.
- As I will shortly clarify, being a tier-one translator from the start does not at all mean that I was a good translator from the start.

## Who Am I Talking To?

- **Commercial translators.**
- **Particularly those who have *not* been translating that long.**
- **Most find their perceived “natural” position in the food chain quite quickly.**
- **Mobility after that appears tough for many.**

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- By commercial translators, I refer to people working in fields in which there is a reliable supply work sufficient to make a living from and in which clients with serious money to spend are accessible. Such fields include industrial product manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, medicine, finance, patents, and legal. Compared with these commercial translation fields, we have things such as religion, Japanese culture, and literature.
- I have come to feel that translator mobility along the food chain is quite limited after a few years of translating. This is based on anecdotal evidence, of course, but I have a considerable amount of such evidence, having been around this block—and a few other blocks—a few times. There are surely exceptions, but they appear to me to be rare. Translators tend not to move up or down on the food chain after a few years, having found where they think they should be or need to be in the food chain.
- I have watched a constant stream of people come into

translation; some stay and some leave. Of the ones who stay, after decades many can be found on the same link of the food chain they were on in the first few years of their career. Was it a choice, or was it simply resignation? Check out Proz to see what I mean.

## What am I going to talk about?

- Getting to tier one in translation, where you provide translation to *translation consumers* as your clients.
- Because of my background and what I do, this means mostly *NES* translators acquiring *Japanese* and also *non-Japanese translation consumers* as clients.

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- For the purpose of my presentation, you can take “translation consumers” to mean what is generally referred to as direct clients. In fact, I will be using these terms interchangeably.
- My focus as indicated here does not at all imply that what I have to say will be of no use to non-native-English speaking translators or to EN-to-JA translators.

## Definitions of Tier *One* and Tier *Two*

- These terms are totally *unrelated* to translation quality or translator skill.
- I will be using the terms in the sense that they are used in the automotive industry.

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- In the auto industry, the tier-one suppliers sell their products to manufacturers of cars (generally referred to as OEMs), and tier-two suppliers sell to tier-one suppliers. I have some tier-one auto suppliers as clients.

## Tier-Two Translation Providers:

- **Sell to tier-one translation providers.**
- **Almost all individuals translators are tier-two translators.**
- **But not all tier-two translation providers are translators.**

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- The downward subcontracting spiral often seen in translation can mean that there are numerous entities—perhaps as many as four—between the translation practitioner and the translation consumer. Some tier-two translation providers, for example, purchase translations from tier-three translators for resale.

## Tier-One Translation Providers:

- Sell translation to ***translation consumers***, as opposed to translation purchaser/resellers.
- Almost all translation sold in some markets is purchased for resale by tier-one translation suppliers that know nothing about translation.

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- Again, the translation consumers are what are normally called direct clients.
- One good example of the “normal order flow” can be seen in the huge market for discovery document translation for litigation in the US.
- This market is served almost exclusively by a small number of large ***translation brokers*** that have no translation ability themselves and are pretty much clueless about translation in general, let alone JA-to-EN translation. But they sell the overwhelming portion of that type of JA-to-EN translation in the US.
- Since almost all the JA-to-EN translation sold outside Japan is sold by such purchaser/resellers, I will not hesitate to call them ***brokers***. Even when they add value—a rare occurrence in discovery document translation—they need to purchase that added value and cannot themselves judge the “value of the added value” they have purchased for resale.
- But as a tier-one translator, you need not be concerned about such brokers.

## A Paradox

- Being a *tier-one translator* makes it easier to become a *good translator*.
- Being a *good translator* makes it easier to be a *tier-one translator*.
- But translating well is *not sufficient* to make you a tier-one translator.

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- It's sort of like saying you have to be there to get there.
- Actually, it's even worse, because just being a good translator doesn't assure you entry to tier one.

## Why Tier-One in the First Place?

- Choose *subject matter*.
- Acquire field-specific expertise.
- Insurance against the coming *collapse of the middle*.
- Much higher rates.
- Avoid payment problems.

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- You select your subject matter by selecting your translation consumer clients. The best way to do that is *market actively*, as opposed to waiting for work to arrive. More on that later.
- When you have a limited number of fields you work in, it is easier to acquire expertise.
- And, of course, higher rates.
- Japanese translation consumers are noted for their business ethics. I have only one time in nearly four decades been stiffed, and that was because of a “legitimate” bankruptcy.

## Another Benefit of Being a Tier-one Translation Supplier

- **Access to the author or at least someone who has knowledge of the subject matter you are translating.**

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- Unless you are working for one of the few smaller translation agencies, if you are on tier two, you will seldom have any contact with people who have any knowledge of the subject matter you are translating. This is because most translation is bought and sold by entities without such knowledge. Without access to someone who knows, you are more likely to need to guess at things. Alternatively, you might try asking questions, but success in getting answers via an agency will vary, particularly since the typical agency will not understand your questions, let alone know or understand the answers.

## Choose Your Subject Matter and Acquire Field-specific Expertise

- **Actively sell to places *you* select as needing what *you* do well.**
- **Get up to speed in “something,” so you need not take on “everything.”**

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- Tier-two translators who take work from tier-one brokers sometimes cannot choose their fields, beyond telling the brokers the kind of work they *prefer*. The stark reality of the translation business is that very little JA-to-EN translation sold outside Japan is sold by brokers with any particular specialization. Most of them take all comers and take all fields. The exceptions are a small number of small translation companies specialized in Japanese.
- As a tier-one translator, because you opt to *choose your fields by actively choosing your clients*, you will have an easier time learning what you are translating. The other side of this coin is that, when speaking to clients (and you will need to *speak to clients*—the consumers of your product), you will need to have a basic understanding of what they do and what they are about from the outset of the relationship, or there likely won't be a relationship.

# Insurance Against the Collapse of the Middle

- **Both the bottom and the middle will collapse.**
- **Middle-level translators will find they cannot compete.**
- **The way out is to aim higher.**

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- The collapse of the middle and also the bottom of the translation food chain has already begun. The translators who will survive this collapse are more than ever going to be some at the bottom, those already at the top, and middle-level translators who decide to aim higher.
- Translators at the bottom might survive by suffering lower and lower rates. Even they, however, are already succumbing to the onslaught of machine translation. I am talking about translators in places like India and China. This is particularly true in cases in which bad translation is considered to be “good enough.” Discovery document translation in the US is just such a demand sector.
- Translators in the middle, many of whom are already competing, often unsuccessfully, with people at the bottom, will find it harder and harder to keep their heads above water by simply continuing to do what they have been doing all along.
- The ones at the top in the food chain—the tier-one translators—will survive if they can do things that the vast majority of translators in the middle—and certainly the ones at the bottom—cannot.
- What can the ones at the top (and those in the middle aiming for the top) do that the ones at the bottom cannot? Well, it is not only providing high-quality translations, but also engaging in direct customer interaction. Pro-active marketing is one particularly important aspect of

that engagement. And by pro-active marketing, I am not talking about having a website, joining translators groups, or making an account on Proz or even LinkedIn.

- Providers at the bottom might try to fake it, but it is not difficult for potential clients to out a broker purporting to be in Japan, for example, but actually based in a low-income country. It's as easy as outing call center personnel in South Asia.

## Much Higher Rates

- **Should be obvious, but how much higher?**
- **The China price is non-issue.**

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- As a point on the graph, domestic and US law firm clients and overseas manufacturer clients are quite willing to pay tier-one translation providers at least JPY 30 or 35 per word of target text for JA-to-EN translation. I strongly suspect that such rates are rare when selling translation to most brokers.
- Brokers overseas these days regularly ask NES translators outside Japan to work for what could best be called the “China price.” And there are translators in the US happy to work at a bit over the China price but still one-half or less of a rate that tier-one translators might start to consider.
- The reason? The translators accepting those low rates almost always work through brokers and are in the US, isolated and in many cases without access to or a desire to meet higher-paying clients, in Japan or elsewhere. And the Internet does not give them access to Japanese translation consumers, for reasons I will touch on later.

# Avoid Payment Problems

- **Japanese direct clients almost all behave ethically.**
- **No need to sheepishly ask “Has anyone ever worked with Globally Empowering Language Solutions?”**

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- This has been my experience. I have gotten stiffed only one time in about four decades with Japanese clients. It was a legitimate bankruptcy. One day I got a letter from a court in Nagano Prefecture. I wondered who was suing me in Nagano. It turned out to be an invitation to a creditors' meeting, at which I could put in my bid to recover some of the 90,000 yen my soon-to-be-defunct client owed me. Since the payments would very likely be made proportional, among the other creditors, to the amount owed, I suspected that I would not even get the train fare to the courthouse. I checked 放棄 (waived) and moved on. My contact at that company moved to a different company, from which he continued to order translations.
- But that was my only bad debt problem in all my years in doing business with Japanese direct clients.
- If you are selling to translation consumers—particularly in Japan—you will not need to turn to translator fora and ask whether anyone has worked with some unknown outfit. Unlike many translation brokers, translation consumers almost all have something to lose by treating their suppliers poorly, so they rarely do.

## **First, Some Things *Not* the Keys to Getting into Tier One**

- **Forming a company.**
- **Having a beautiful website.**
- **Hanging out on social media.**
- **Hanging out on reverse auctions.**
- **Hanging out at conferences like this.**

## Forming a Company

- **Companies, including paper companies with no substance, are everywhere.**
- **Just having a company will not convince a client—particularly a Japanese client—that you have what it takes.**

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- Companies are a dime a dozen. In Japan, for a few thousand yen, you can buy a book telling you how to register a company. You fill out the template forms provided by the publisher and submit them that day; you will have your company registered in a week or so.
- But if you just form a company and then proudly present yourself as the company president but are still taking work from tier-one translation sellers (a common phenomenon), you haven't even taken the first substantial step out of tier two.
- Speaking of substance-challenged paper companies, one way to reliably tell your prospective clients that you and your company can be blown away by a gentle breeze is to sell to them using business cards proclaiming that you are the president of the company. Presidents of companies likely to get translation work from substantial clients in Japan do not go out and sell.
- I suggest that you print two sets of cards, one with your "president" title to impress people who are impressionable, and one with something more believable for someone translating and selling translation.

## Having a Beautiful Website

- **Having a website is a given, but alone is pretty much meaningless.**
- ***Growing your content* can show that you have *substance* (or at least something to say), but creating content costs you time.**

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- If you have a nice-looking website, that really *says something!* Unfortunately, all it says is that you have a nice-looking website. It doesn't say anything about your substance, your capability of providing translation, your track record, or anything else beyond the superficial face that you create with your website. And even if you claim all of those things on your website, remember that hundreds of others are saying precisely the same thing on their websites. You need something beyond a website.
- Static websites—quite common for translators—will quickly sink down in the rankings and not attract much attention. That is not to say that a website is necessarily going to attract work from the better clients anyway. For most Japanese clients, in fact, a website alone is pretty much ineffective.
- The best way to convince a prospective client that you have no substance is with a website that looks like you are begging for work. But this is precisely what most translators have for websites; just a few pages, with a resume, of all things, being the most prominent feature. More on resumes later.

## Hanging out on Social Media

- **Clients with serious money to pay don't hang out there to find translators.**
- **Japanese clients don't go to the Internet to find translation services. They purchase those services from people who *sell to them*.**

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- I have encountered translators (chiefly, albeit, those not working with Japanese language) who claim that they have met “good clients” via social media. When questioned a bit about *what kind* of “good clients” they are speaking of, few even mention even what *type* of clients they are meeting (and, of course, I don't ask for client names). There is great diversity regarding what translators consider to be good clients.
- That truly good clients for tier-one translators don't hang out on social media is not a rumor I'm spreading or a suspicion on my part.
- I ask my direct *Japanese* clients where they go for translation. These clients do not go to the Internet in general and certainly do not hang out on social media to look for translation services. And I have almost no clients who even hang out personally on social media, and when they do it is certainly not to find translation services. I ask about these things.

## Hanging out on Reverse Auctions

- This should be obvious, but **good translation consumers** are rarely found on places like Proz.
- There are better approaches not involving competing with people in places that have many **third-language translators**.

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- Why hang out on reverse auctions? They are not the places where the high-paying translation consumers with writer-driven work hang out.
- I have a colleague who says that a Proz profile attracts **interpreting** clients. I don't doubt that. And in rare or special cases it might do the same for **translation** clients. However, the definition of good **translation** client is very dependent upon your position on the food chain. The class of client looking to reverse auctions is qualitatively different from the ones you need to engage with as a tier-one translator.
- If you think you want to hang out on reverse auctions, take a look at the locations of the Japanese-to-English translators on Proz, for example. You will find that a great many of the translators there have neither Japanese nor English as their native language. They are what I call **third-language translators**.

## Hanging out at Conferences Like This One

- **Not many translation *consumers* here.**
- **Tier-one translators rarely introduce colleagues to good direct clients.**
- **And there are very few tier-one translators here to start with.**

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- Events like this are good place for translators to interact with each other, but are really terrible for finding good *translation consumers*. You might find a broker or two, however.
- I recall at a coffee break at an IJET in Okinawa some time back having a young woman sit down at our table. Without any warning, she posed two questions in rapid succession. Are you a translator (she had gone to a fairly remote place in Okinawa for a translators' conference; where did she think she was, I wondered) and what are your rates? She was not exactly a smooth operator.
- I mentioned my minimum rate, and she suddenly needed to visit another table. It was clear that she was skulking around, working the aisles, as it were, looking for cheap translators.
- For translators looking for high-paying translation consumer clients to target as a tier-one translation provider, the chance that there are any *aisles to work* at this or any other translation conference is extremely small.

## **Entry into Tier One**

### **What You Actually Need: Some Basics**

- **Physical proximity to demand.**
- **Translation ability & specialization.**
- **Skepticism about what you have heard about dealing directly with clients.**
- **Willingness to discard some beliefs about how B2B works, particularly in Japan.**

## Why Physical Proximity? Didn't the Internet Obviate that?

- **The short answer is a definite *no*, and certainly if you are aiming at Japanese translation consumers with writer-driven texts to translate.**

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- The Internet has not effected much change in the expectations of translation clients in Japan, and it is the clients in Japan that pay well for writer-driven translations.
- That said, places such as law firms in the US are different. In fact, I have been contacted by new law firm clients after an attorney or a paralegal found my company's contact information listed on the Tokyo US Embassy website. However, passive marketing such as being listed on some webpage is not very effective with Japanese clients.

## Translation Ability & Specialization

- **If you want to be a bulk translation broker, lies and bluster will suffice.**
- **But if you need to meet clients (and you will need to for most Japanese clients), without those qualities you will be found out in a moment by the client.**

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- This is the dirty underbelly of the translation business as a whole. Agencies that themselves have neither translation ability nor any subject-matter knowledge or specialization can get by—at least in the beginning—with lies and bluster about the thousands of expert translators they have “registered” in their “global network.”
- As a small operator trying to sell your services, however, you will not get by with lies or bluster, because you need to meet the client directly (in Japan, certainly) and they will mercilessly judge your abilities or lack of them in quick order.

## **Inherited Myths about Dealing Directly with Translation Consumers**

- **It's more trouble than it's worth.**
- **Translation consumers (end clients) won't talk to you anyway.**

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- I find that these are baseless rationalizations in most cases.

## Is it really more trouble than it is worth ?

- **People who say this mostly haven't tried. 不戦負け組.**
- **Need to entertain?**
- **Need for real bricks & mortar?**

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- Some people will believe anything, and one of the things that some people believe is that it is not worth trying. It's a comforting belief. Oddly, most of these people haven't tried in earnest (or perhaps at all) and are thus the last people who should be talking about whether it is worth it or not.
- I almost never entertain my Japanese clients. I only slightly more often entertain foreign clients visiting Japan, but my business with Japanese clients was obtained—and is maintained—without having to entertain. Don't believe the entertainment myth.
- Some more comments on bricks, mortar, and other types of infrastructure (the other types are just as important) are coming. At this point, I will just say that you at least should avoid screaming "I have no substance!" at people who can give you money for translation.

## Translation consumers will not talk to a small operator.

- **This could be true, *if* you have decided not to do what direct clients expect of someone worthy of their purchase orders.**

- Japanese entities that order translation are regularly approached by people ***selling*** translation. They don't generally (in fact, rarely) go to the Internet to find a new translation provider. And they have certain expectations of people who come selling to them. You must walk the walk that they expect you to walk.
- That said, it might be a bit rash to assume, just because you are not a "real" company with many bricks and lots of mortar, that you cannot get your foot in the door. You have a chance, and there are reasons why it might not be as difficult as some people make it out to be. **Most Japanese translation consumers have never met a real live translator. If you are real, alive, and a translator, you might think about giving them a "translator experience."**

## Entry into Tier One: Some Specific Suggestions

- **Get a life before starting to translate.**
- **Move to Japan.**
- **Acquire sales-ready Japanese.**
- **Make *modest* investments.**
- ***Have credible* infrastructure.**

# Get a Life before Translation

- **Experience and knowledge.**
- **Developing a specialization.**
- **Networking.**

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- In the past there were as many paths to a translation career as there were translators. There has perhaps been some loss of that background diversity, probably brought about at least in part by more people going to university for the purpose of becoming a translator. But there is much to be said for actively seeking out a non-translation life before starting to translate. That can be in an entity engaged in the field you wish to translate in or—even better—in a position that will require you to translate in that field, perhaps along side more experienced translators. Unfortunately, translation companies of any size do not usually have translator employees, so you might need to approach smaller outfits if the aim is to work at a translation company. Still, even non-translation positions are useful to learn a field. The alternative is to hop into translation immediately after university, but unless you have a background in some specialization, you will probably have quite a rough road to travel.
- Specialization is important to becoming credible with ***translation consumers***. Every translation worth paying for is about “something,” not about “general,” although many translators claim to be general translators. If you have a non-translation life about “something” you have the start you need in developing a specialization.
- And, of course, you can make valuable contacts by being in even a non-

translation environment. For example, some of my better clients for translation back in the early 1980s were people I met while running a US company in Japan. Some were clients for our measuring instrument products. After I left that company, I approached my former Japanese competitors as well.

## Why Move to Japan?

- **It's where most writer-driven JA-to-EN translation demand originates.**
- **JA-to-EN work of any type is higher-paid in Japan than outside Japan.**
- **There are no substantial barriers to the entry of a Westerner or Westerner-run translation company.**

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- Japan is the source of most of the demand for writer-driven JA-to-EN translation. To be clear, writer-driven translation demand is demand from the originator of a source text. Examples are user manuals for Japanese products, patents for filing outside Japan, and financial texts generated in Japan but intended to reach readers outside Japan. There are many other examples.
- Because the writer—more precisely in most cases the writer's employer—has an interest in having their Japanese message translated well, such translation is more highly paid than the reader-driven translation that is typical of much of the work ordered outside Japan by entities who just want to know what some Japanese text says. That does not mean that reader-driven demand is adequately served by bad translations, however, just that people are not willing to pay as much for such translations as for writer-driven translations.
- That said, the arguably largest reader-driven JA-to-EN demand sector in the US (discovery documents) is being served quite “adequately” by bad translations, many from places such as China and India. I often see quite laughable translations from such places used in depositions of Japanese witnesses.
- There is no particular barrier to a non-Japanese selling translation services in Japan. A bit of ingenuity and resourcefulness might be called

for at the outset, but it is generally a very open market.

## What the Internet Didn't Change about Japanese Business

- **The Internet made it easier to get work, as long as you do not want to work on tier one.**
- **But Japanese clients served by tier-one providers mostly still expect press-the-flesh sales. It's best to visit them.**
- **There are exceptions.**

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- Translators aiming at getting to tier one in JA-to-EN translation need to trash the idea that the Internet changed everything. It certainly did not do that for Japanese translation consumers.
- Japanese translation consumers rarely go out to the Internet for translation; they order translation from places that *go to them and sell*. The Internet has not changed that very much.
- There are exceptions, of course. While going through this presentation, I received an inquiry from the head of a Japanese company (a potential direct client) who had seen my company website. The person who reacted to my website, however, had spent long years in the US and has been active in a US company for years. He is a clear outlier among potential Japanese clients.

## Emulate Masuo if you must, but it would be better if your in-laws live in an urban center.



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- If you move to Japan you might think about options other than living with your in-laws or living wherever your spouse is from, if it is not in or near a major urban area.
- If you must be a Masuo (or Masuko), I highly recommend establishing a dedicated business telephone that your in-laws will not—and need not—answer. I was a bit surprised to find that this is not always the case.
- Establish a wall between your business and your in-laws.

## Masuo Advantages

- **Low rent & less risk if hard times hit.**
- **Spouse stays close to their parents.**
- **No need for a spouse job change.**
- **Can get you out of the crowded city.**
- **You might get to live in what you have come to view as “best place in Japan.”**

- That said, there are arguably advantages to leading a Masuo life.

## ***Distant* Masuo Disadvantages**

- **Distance from many clients.**
- **Can send the wrong message if you are in a remote area and, rest assured, clients in Japan will realize that early on in a relationship.**
- **Can remove the incentive to try harder.**

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- But ***acquisition*** of Japanese translation consumers as clients still mostly requires direct contact. If you live in a part of Japan distant from most potential clients, you might still be able to mine a local niche demand sector, but you will have many more and better options in distant urban areas. Alternatively, it could involve considerable travel to urban centers.
- Since part of your client-facing presence is disclosure of your real physical address (including on your website), you are going to have to come clean to clients about living in Hachinohe or wherever you have chosen as your remote camp.
- Even if that is not a problem, there is the downside that it is easy for some people to fall into a rut of complacency because of the low risk level.

## Selling to Japanese Clients

- If you are aiming at direct Japanese clients, you will be seriously limited if you cannot sell *in Japanese* as expected by the client.
- Only a small portion of Westerners are capable of selling translation—or anything—in Japanese, regardless of their translation skills.

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- **Trigger warning.** The sensitive topic of spoken Japanese is coming up and might be distressful to some listeners.
- This is an unavoidable hurdle. Unless you are seeking out non-Japanese entities in Japan or elsewhere or want to attempt to deal with your Japanese clients and prospects in English (a highly disadvantageous strategy, even if your client speaks good English), you will do much better by acquiring sales-ready spoken Japanese.
- I have heard many translators themselves admit that they are not up to the task of selling in Japanese. I have also heard others who think they are, but are not. Actually, *most Japanese* are not capable of selling in Japanese.

## Acquiring Sales-Ready Spoken Japanese

- **Abandon the idea that university learning alone will suffice.**
- **Even long years in Japan might not do it.**
- **Cultivate contacts with people who actually sell in Japanese.**
- **I was lucky to have an opportunity to do that many years ago.**

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- I have met a large enough sample of NES translators to know that university learning alone is highly unlikely to get you where you need to be.
- Even years in Japan are not generally sufficient.
- I suggest that you seek interaction with people who can sell in Japanese and actually do just that.
- Arguments about nature or nurture aside, luck played a big role in my case.
- When I first came to Japan this time in 1977, I had established and was running the Japan branch of a US manufacturer of electronic measuring instruments. I was short on sales people and would find myself out on sales calls, at first with an experienced salesman at my side. I stole everything I could from that guy. That was the best education I could get on how not to spit up on myself in front of a customer. I find that I'm spitting up on myself much less in the last few decades. My cleaning bill was much higher in the first decade or so.

## **Selling to Japanese Clients: Field-Specific Knowledge**

- **If you work through brokers, clients may never know if you are not qualified.**
- **But direct clients you meet will usually figure it out very quickly.**
- **Faking it seldom works.**

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- You might get by working through an agent or broker even if you are not that qualified or spend hours Googling things that you should have known before you accepted a job.
- That won't work with direct translation consumer clients, because you almost always will need to meet them.
- You need to understand what you are talking about and need to understand what your prospective client's business is all about. On a sales call, you will be speaking to someone who wonders from the outset whether you understand fast Fourier transforms, or whether you're ok with liquid chromatography, or whether you can understand their liquid-crystal display technology. You cannot fake it until you make it, and you cannot use Google during a sales call.

## **Selling to Japanese Clients: Measure Twice Cut Once**

- **Prepare.**
- **Prepare.**
- **Prepare.**
- **You will lose points and probably never be called on by a prospect if you don't know their business.**

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- There is a saying that when cutting a board a skillful carpenter measures twice and cuts once.
- I can't overemphasize the importance of preparation before you meet a client.
- If you are talking to a client, you had better know who they are, what they do, what they make, and why you want to talk to them. Because I am basically very timid, I spend lots of time studying a client before I go in on them. I highly recommend that you front-load your prepping efforts before you face a prospect. It can prevent embarrassment and failure.

## **Freebieism is the Opiate of the Masses**

- **Free email accounts.**
- **Free 30-day software trials.**
- **Free CAT tools**
- **Free OCR software.**
- **Free dictionaries.**

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- People like freebies. I'm really no exception. But too much reliance on freebies can make you forget that you sometimes need to pay for products and services. There's a free version of just about everything. But it is not necessarily as good as you need or as good as you should have.

## Connectivity Infrastructure

- **Trigger Warning:** Belief-system invalidation blip spotted.
- “Real” email accounts.
- Your own domain.
- A dedicated landline telephone.

# Don't Use a Free Email for Business

- **Yes, “everybody” uses them, but they are not appropriate in tier one and hint that you’re not that serious.**
- **Perceived security risks.**

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- If you are attempting to deal with substantial translation consumers, using a free email account broadcasts your lack of commitment and an unwillingness to do what is expected. You are essentially announcing that you might not be in it for the long run. Translation brokers probably mostly don't care. As a matter of fact, seeing that you use a free email account, a broker might be lulled into the comfortable feeling that you are not going to expect to be treated as professionally as someone with their own email account. Direct clients can see free email accounts for what they are.
- Some of our clients actually forbid us from using gmail (there was no danger of that happening), because they are worried (correctly) that email and attachments would be used and sold by the purportedly “non-evil” empire of Google.

## Get Your Own Unique Domain

- **Not that expensive, but not free. Discard the notion that you can operate *as a business* with near zero investment and expense.**
- **A website that is just yours.**

**Trigger warning:** Now I'm going to again suggest something that costs money.

- The cost of hosting your unique domain is well-spent.
- It shows that you are a bit more serious than others who opt out of having a more serious Internet presence.
- Even in Japan, the monthly expense of my company domain hosting service is about one-half of what you would spend for a modest dinner in a not-very-trendy eatery.
- Owning your very own domain & website provides you with a vehicle to convey content, which is a very useful cyberspace asset. But you should remember that passive marketing such as having a website, even loaded with content, is seldom sufficient.

# Get a Landline

- **It's expected in B2B in Japan; do it.**
- **As silly as you might think it is, mobile-only translation providers are as suspicious as mobile-only translation clients.**

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- As nice as it would be to have one type of telephone suffice, we are not there yet, and certainly not there yet in Japan.
- I have an increasing proportion of clients who list their cellphone numbers (often for a company-provided mobile phone) on their business cards *in addition* to their landline number. But I have yet to run into a serious business person in Japan with *only* a cellphone number on their business card.

## **Your Website: Don't Throw it on the Junkpile of Abandoned Translator Websites**

- **Build one and develop its content.**
- **Disclose your physical address.**

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- From what I have seen, most—perhaps almost all—translator websites are “one-time events.” They are built and then abandoned.
- To get the most advantage from a website, you need content that you create and that grows. But, of course, that involves expense in terms of your time.
- Abandon the notion that it is ok not to disclose your physical address on your website. It's a given in B2B, and if you are looking to be a tier-one translator, you are definitely going to be doing B2B transactions. Disclose your physical address, even if it is your residence.

## Your Telephone

- **Answer it or—better yet—have *someone else* answer it for you at least once in a while.**
- **Don't route everything to voicemail.**
- **If you forward calls *don't* answer calls at any time of day.**

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- Allowing people to call you and have someone other than you answer the phone once in a while sounds trivial, but can go a long way to demonstrating that you are serious. Your particular situation will govern how you can achieve that.
- I know some freelancers who never answer incoming calls directly, always forcing callers to leave a message or hang up in distress. This sends the wrong message to a potential client. Encountering voicemail every single time, the first thing a Japanese prospect might think is that you have a day job. Even worse, they might think that you are not even in Japan.
- And since you are going to be in business, have business hours, after which the client will need to email you. This is not nearly as serious a problem as it was years ago. Most things come in by email anyway.

## Your Business Cards

- **Disclose your physical address.**
- **Don't assume something good will come of a business card exchange any time soon.**
- **Without follow-up, you can be fairly certain that nothing will happen.**

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- Some translators actually don't have their physical address on their business cards. You're in business. Put your physical address on your business card, just like it is on your website; again, even if it is your residence.
- I have met translators who happily announce that they were able to hand out 20 business cards at some event. My reaction is "so what?" Very little is likely to happen unless they continue the interaction.
- Handing a business card to someone is a very low-risk strategy. But it is usually also a very-low-return strategy. Follow-up is important.

## The People to Seek Out

- **Hang out with people who make lots of money.**
- **Hang out at events attended by potential clients.**

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- Lawyer jokes aside, I find that high-paid attorneys have much less problem with paying serious translation rates than do low-paid employees. In your particular field of specialization, you need to figure out what methods *you* can use to gain access to such people *useful to you* in building your business.
- Attend events that are likely to be attended by your potential clients. You will need to do research to figure out just what events there are for you to attend. If you have law firm clients, for example, ask to be allowed to attend events such as seminars that they run for their clients and prospective clients and then “work the aisles” when you get there; there is often a more casual get-together time after such seminars.
- In actuality, the attorneys holding these seminars are doing it for precisely the same reason—to work the aisles. These seminars are essentially sales talks in the guise of a seminar.

## Events Attended by Prospective Clients in your Field of Specialization

- **Non-translation conferences.**
- **Trade shows.**

- I am a frequent attendee at such events. I do exchange business cards, but seldom is the person at an exhibition booth of a trade show the person I need to talk to. There are other reasons I attend. One is to meet new people in a company I already deal with. Another is to learn more about the products and technologies of exhibitors. If they have English-language materials, take some home. You might find out just how good or bad they are at presenting themselves in English.
- And if their English is good, don't give up, because it probably means that they are willing to spend real money producing English materials. They are a prospect in a *half-full* glass of milk.

## **What can happen when you are viewed as an individual member of the translation labor pool.**

- **Income friction.**
- **Need to keep your billings secret from some people at your client.**
- **Surprising offers of in-house work.**

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- If you are aiming to serve translation consumers, you need to avoid appearing to be part of the translation labor pool if at all possible, and I assure you that it is possible. Some interesting things can happen if you don't succeed.

# Income Friction

- **If you are seen as an individual, low-paid (and even some higher-paid) people working at your client can get emotional about your billings.**

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- Even after you acquire a high-paying client, you often need to deal with lower-paid people who are in a position to know what your billings are, and that could lead to what I call *income friction*. How can you put on your pants one leg at a time, just like the client, and expect to make multiples of the monthly salary of the person who sends you work? I have encountered a type of income friction two times—that I know of—early in my journey as a translator, before I wised up to this problem.

## Hiding your income from some people at your client

- **I recently had a potential problem with a good law firm client, the root cause probably being the terrible employment situation for young attorneys in the US.**

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- I have been told by a good attorney client of mine recently not to make the mistake of copying his associate when we send our invoices. I am sure the client himself does not care (he is a highly paid US attorney).
- But I can well imagine that the associate (a young attorney) might be quite annoyed to see our billings for translations of things they write. As a bit of background, many young US attorneys are roaming the streets looking for work these days, and some who opt for contract attorney work (the uberization of attorney work) are willing to do things like discovery document review (monolingual, of course) for as low as 40 or 50 USD per hour.

# Offers of In-house Positions

- **This happened to me with two good manufacturing clients back in the crazy bubbly days of the 1980s.**

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- Before I adjusted my client-facing presence to something less-stressful to low-paid personal, I had two clients offer me in-house positions, clearly because of income friction.
- Each client was giving me more than JPY 1M per month and I was doing other clients' work as well. The situation with these companies was rather similar, and I verified afterward with one of them that the amount I was billing them was causing a great deal of strife within the department I dealt with. In particular, there was a great deal of animosity directed at the person ordering translations and authorizing our billings.
- Their solution was to offer me an in-house position at a significantly reduced income (even when you added in benefits), hoping to smooth out the distress and the animosity.
- I thanked them, but needed to explain that I had another client that I was billing just about the same amount of money monthly and that a 40% reduction from my normal billings—even with employment security—would not be acceptable.

## **Additional Suggestions for Establishing a “non-individual” presence:**

- **Don’t disclose or hand to a client anything that looks like a resume.**
- **Don’t boast of your formal qualifications.**

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- If you are being asked for a resume, be aware that you are at risk of being seen as a member of the translation labor pool. Don’t make and distribute a resume. Visit the client and act as if you belong. And you should seriously consider not having anything on your website that looks like a resume.
- High-paying clients have not once asked me for a resume or qualifications, nor would I think I telling them about qualifications I have gotten, because it would mark me as a beginner.

# The Things to Read

- **Read in the field of your specialty in *both Japanese and English*.**
- **Read what your clients read.**

- Returning to the topic of specialization for a moment before I wrap up.
- I suspect that there are many Japanese-to-English translators who do little reading of Japanese in a specialized field beyond the texts they are given to translate. Some have told me that that reading is sufficient. I don't believe that for a moment.
- That is a shame, because lots of helpful material is available, and much of it is *free*.
- Your first task might be figuring out what your client reads. If you are in Japan and need to visit the client (that's rather redundant, isn't it?), they might have a magazine rack in their waiting area. Take a peek. Or simply ask an existing client or prospect what field-specific magazines and newspapers they read or would suggest, being a bit careful not to sound like too much of a beginner.

## Examples of Things I Read

- 日経 (*paid* account; particularly their 「企業」 pages).
- トラ技 (トランジスタ技術)
- 日経エレクトロニクス

- These are just examples.
- Nikkei's 企業 pages provide information on individual companies and what they are doing; new factories, mergers, products.
- トラ技 is a monthly magazine that has major features on things like GPS receiving units, circuit design, and other geeky electronics topics.
- 日経エレクトロニクス is the Nikkei version of a magazine originating in the US.
- Neither of the above electronics magazines are read by consumers; they are read by people working in electronics. トラ技 is available in most large bookstores in Japan.

# Thank you!

**I am reachable at:**

`ijet-lise@kirameki-translation.co.jp`