

PLANNING A MULTILINGUAL EVENT

Language Services – Janet Bonet

When planning a community event or organizing a new neighborhood association, it is essential in today's culturally diverse neighborhoods to create opportunities for including our limited English proficient (LEP) neighbors. Doing duplicate or parallel events where different groups do the same things but separately, in my opinion, is a step in the right direction for familiarizing the LEP group with neighborhood organizing and action, but it does not bring the neighbors TOGETHER. Language remains a barrier to unity and weakens the ability of the neighborhood to find common ground for addressing issues that face the community.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where people can travel long distances in relatively short timeframes. Sadly, many are forced into refugee situations resulting in relocation to neighborhoods all over the United States, thousands of miles from their native homes. Mobility such as that translates to a rich and wonderful cultural mix blooming in our neighborhoods. However, learning all the culture of a new land is not easy nor is learning a new language. Many new residents face a significant challenge when they need to access services such as schools for their children, renting a home, finding a job, buying cloths, hospitals) participate in events that impact their neighborhoods. This can mean that the voices of some of our neighbors cannot be heard and their energy, ideas and participation are lost to the community at large.

Communities can take some basic steps toward increasing participation of the limited English proficient (LEP) residents in our neighborhoods and CAN succeed in establishing the plan, process and opportunities for greater inclusivity. We get to know each other by talking to each other, by working with each other, by helping each other. We can do it.

THE QUESTIONS:

WHY ARE WE REACHING OUT AND TO WHOM?

We live in a globalized society. The movement of people is easier, faster and more fluid than ever. Television, internet and tourism along with war, fluctuating economies, climate changes and famine are each parts of the cause for people not staying in one place. Whether it we are talking about 1816, 1916, or 2016, whatever the reason, our neighborhoods are as dynamic now as they were in the days when immigrants flowed through Elise Island to fill the wide-open spaces of the US. That is just the fact of it.

How neighborhoods adapted in the past is not so different to what we are able to do now – we just have more national historical experience at it and lots of new technology. So are we willing to that knowledge and technology to be inclusive neighborhoods? We all know that much more can be accomplished by working together and focusing on our common ground – our neighborhood.

Do you know who lives in your neighborhood?

CULTURAL AWARENESS

Language is part of our cultural origins and is the topic of this essay but there are many other facets of culture that impact how newcomers interact with their new surroundings and neighbors. Something long-time residents of an area may take for granted or just expect everyone to know, might be totally unknown to new arrivals. Some groups may come from parts of the world where their religion, tribal origins, education, or gender resulted in violent persecution. They did not want to or could not participate in community events because they were rejected and any community organizing was cause for greater violence rather than cooperative efforts so they stayed silent and isolated for safety sake. Or perhaps it was not part of their society to organize around

neighborhood affiliation but rather to do so around a single elder, religious center, school, or political groups. In short, organizing as a neighborhood might be an entirely unknown concept for some of your neighbors. It could even be a struggle opening the eyes and minds of longtime neighbors to the idea of including the new ones. Educating people to a new cultural framework may be your first step. The challenge becomes one of getting all the neighbors, new and old, to see they have that common ground – the neighborhood. That means communicating with them.

Cultural diversity and language differences DO NOT have to be barriers. They are obstacles only so long as we let them be. It is an easy excuse to say, “they don’t speak English”, and then not make the effort to include folks. But overcoming obstacles is what neighborhood associations are good at!

ARE THERE VOLUNTEER INTERPRETERS AND TRANSLATORS AVAILABLE?

Interpreters (spoken & sign) and translators (written) provide a valuable service and are essential members of the successful multilingual conference planning team. When planning a multilingual event, your work will be much easier if you work with people who are trained to do the work and know about the logistics, cost, and troubleshooting needed to help you make your event a success for the entire audience.

Sending out an event announcement or invitation in several languages and then not having language services present at the event, sends a confusing, if not insulting, message to the folks you say you want to include. If groups are truly sincere about reaching out to the LEP (limited English proficient) members of their neighborhoods, they will need to remember to include realistic cost estimates for language services. The costs of those services must be included when setting the budget – this means planners need to do some research. Start networking and find out what other organizations and governmental agencies are doing to fulfill the language access requirements and what churches, schools and hospitals are doing for public outreach and education of LEP folks.

Simply saying, “we’ll find volunteers to interpret and translate”, ends up making things more complicated by adding obstacles and pitfalls that hinder your efforts. Or putting – in English – at the end of the English flyer, “To request an interpreter, call XYZ” – who speaks only English. Having the cost and benefit numbers for language access services clearly stated in your grant proposals will make it much easier to get the money you need to offer quality translation and interpretation services to your audience. You pay the caterer, the guest speakers, the support staff, and the janitor, why not pay the interpreters and translators for their services?

There may be volunteers with good intentions who offer to do the work but, all too often, you get what you pay for in such cases. Then, since you haven’t included the costs in your grant or event budget, the week or two before the event, you start your search for those volunteer interpreters and translators. Usually, no one is available, people who volunteered months ago get shy at the last minute, those who do show up may not know how challenging translation and interpretation are and they give up mid-task. That is not a statement made to devalue volunteers or disparage their potential skillset. It is a cautionary “heads-up” – conferences intended to be inclusive of LEP attendees, need language service providers who are **BOTH willing AND able**.

To be fair to the volunteer, you need need know that they fully understand what they are getting into. To be fair to the audience, they deserve to have a qualified person doing the work – a poorly translated invitation that your son did using Google could show your LEP neighbors that you don’t really care about including them. “At least I tried,” is not always “better than nothing.”

WHAT WILL IT COST TO USE A PROFESSIONAL?

If you contact a language services agency to do the translation and interpretation for your event, the agency will most likely contract freelance translators and interpreters and add a percentage to the contractor’s rate to give the agency a profit margin. You can contact the provider directly and negotiate a rate. The key is to know what you are asking for and where to find qualified providers. There are professional associations, the Better Business Bureau, state court websites with lists of certified interpreters. Word of mouth references from other groups that have used a provider before. Do you research so you know who to call and what to ask them.

Interpreters who are independent contractors (otherwise known as freelancers) will charge a fair market rate based on their professional training, experience and the conditions of the job – just like any other professional. The more complex academic or technical topics and events mean more preparation time and are more demanding, thus higher rates will be charged. When deciding what is a fair rate to pay your interpreters, think in terms of the following formula:

- 30% to interpreter for take-home pay
- 30% overhead (otherwise uncompensated research time, office equipment, mileage, etc.)
- 30% taxes
- 10% other expenses (healthcare, childcare, meals at the work site, travel time value – time is money – etc)

This means that a rate of \$60 per hour is actually about \$20 per hour in take-home for the professional interpreter.

Translators usually charge by the word in the target language. Translating has many more variables depending on the difficulty of the text and the timeframe in which you need it done. Many event organizers have had the local high school teacher, or a free computer program, do the translation and then ended up needing it redone at the last minute because the LEP readers have protested they don't understand the translation! That last minute rush costs more. Most translators also have a minimum they charge for small/short jobs. And it is more difficult sometimes to appropriately translate a cute little marketing motto, or a cliché, than it is to translate an engine design manual.

All this is intended to help you get over the sticker shock of the hourly rate an interpreter or translator may quote you and could help you negotiate a discount. As any business person does, language service providers need to consider the cost of doing business, the uncovered expenses, and their take-home pay. So consider what your caterer pays the help, what the janitor makes and what the plumber charges you to tell you there is leaky pipe. It is against FTC regulations for this article to include actual or suggested rates for services because that is considered "price fixing".

Each location has its cost of living and its value of professional services so a market in San Francisco has very different supply and demand forces working on it than what might be found in Omaha or Memphis. Some small settings where a boardroom is used for the event for instance, it may be practical to conference call the interpreter in or do a webinar where both slides and presentation are offered simultaneously.

WHEN DO I NEED TO CONTACT THE LANGUAGE SERVICE PROVIDER?

As with many things, timing is everything. If you include language service providers or people experienced in organizing multilingual events and doing outreach to LEP folks as advisors on your planning committee from the start, they will be able to help keep you on point during the planning stages as to when you need to research, recruit and hire the language service team.

WHAT EQUIPMENT WILL WE NEED TO INCLUDE IN THE BUDGET?

In a conference setting where interpretation will be simultaneous to the presenter's speech, audio equipment (headsets and receivers for the listeners) is technology that is key to service delivery. There are hundreds of companies that rent or sell the equipment but before you go there, do a little research in your community at large.

If you have noticed a need and have a desire to reach out to LEP neighbors, there will probably be an awareness of that same need and desire among social and economic service providers in your community. Sometimes union halls and some event centers, schools, police departments, courts, churches, universities, and local non-profits that work with LEP clients, will have equipment they will either loan you or rent to you at more cost effective rates than a specialty firm. For small events, you may even be able to hold it at one of the locations that has the equipment. Before writing a grant or an event budget, look at all of the potential sources and see if their

equipment would be available for your use on the date you plan to hold the event. For some really small events (6 or fewer), the interpreters may have their own equipment.

HOW MANY INTERPRETERS WILL WE NEED AND WHAT WILL THEY NEED FROM US?

For events scheduled to last longer than thirty minutes, interpreters work in teams of at least two. So it will depend on the length of the event and the number of languages you want to have it interpreted into. Interpreters may have colleagues they prefer to work with so when you contact one, ask if they have suggestions for the second member of the team. The team should have a lead interpreter who will be the team contact. This allows you deal with one person and it is that person's responsibility to be sure the second person is informed of all the details. It is very important that you keep the team fully informed as to speakers, agenda, content and timing of sessions or presentations, when there will be breaks, locations of the event. It is equally important that you keep them informed of ANY changes to these same things.

The interpreters station should be well identified (signage) and comfortable. It should have good lighting, chairs, ample table space for the audio equipment, dictionaries and reference materials, note pads, and water. It must offer line-of-sight access to the speaker and any projection screens. It must be out of, or at least protected from, the pedestrian traffic areas to avoid external noise and distractions and be either behind a sound screen or far enough from the audience so the interpreters' voices do not disturb the attendees who are not using the headphones. How well the interpreters are able to hear the speakers and see the projected information is the main determinant of their ability to deliver their interpretation properly and therefore of your audience to get the message fully. A site tour with the interpreters will assure that the interpreter station meets all the team needs.

Interpreters also need to familiarize themselves with the audio equipment and test it out beforehand. They do not check-out or check-in the headsets and receivers to the individuals so you will need someone who is in charge of the equipment and who the interpreters can contact if they have any questions or need something. That person should also be the one attendees go to if they have questions about getting or using the equipment.

In order to assure your interpreters are as well prepared as they can be, please get all the information possible to them well ahead of the event (at least one week prior). This includes: 1) the speakers' names and any introductory information the moderator may be planning to read about them; 2) final versions of PowerPoints; 3) graphs and charts; 4) speeches; 5) subject matter materials or bibliography for vocabulary preparation. Interpreters are fluent in their languages but they are not walking encyclopedias! Professionally trained interpreters keep such materials confidential. And it is of great help to the interpreters if the speakers are informed on how to work with interpreters.

TIPS TO THE SPEAKERS

Often, when people get in front of a crowd, they speak differently (faster, use lots of sarcasm or jokes) than usual because they are nervous. It is normal. But, if you want the audience to hear and understand all the great things you have to say, you will want to keep the following tips in mind:

1. **Place the microphone directly in front of you** and pointed it at your mouth but not so close that your lips touch it.
2. **Speak in your everyday voice** as if you were speaking to a friend over coffee, let the microphone do its job. And please use the microphone. Floating speakers who thinks their voice projects just fine without a microphone, will usually lose a portion of the audience who cannot hear them but don't want to draw attention to themselves. But most importantly in an interpreted presentation, the interpreter may not hear all you say and thus your message may be incomplete to those who are hearing your message through the interpreter.
3. **Speak at a reasonable pace**, which means at about the pace of what you hear from a narrator on a documentary film. Speak at an "average pace". Fast enough to not sound like the moderator at a golf tournament but slow enough for the interpreter to capture and deliver your message fully.

4. **Speak clearly**, don't mumble or cut-off the ends of your words. Don't chew the last few words of your sentence. Interpreters can only interpret what they hear. If what they hear is not clear ... well as the saying goes, "Garbage in, garbage out."
5. **Speak in complete thoughts**. Interpreters need complete sentences to ensure they understand what you are saying and can convert it to the second language. Not all languages use the same structure for expressing things, so we need to know all the information of the sentence to make it clear in the second language.
6. **Giving a speech is not just reading a text out loud**. Try to speak normally and clearly. If you are going to read a prepared script, please be sure the interpreters have a copy of it well in advance. This is important if they are to help you be fully understood in the other language.
7. **Quote figures slowly and distinctly** because numbers can be troublesome to interpret. Give the interpreter a copy of any data you plan to quote or slides you will be showing.
8. **Acronyms are language specific** – that is, for example, the American Bar Association acronym (ABA) is not directly converted to those same three letters from English into Spanish or Greek, for instance. Interpreters need to know what - full or acronymic form -- governmental departments, organizations and institutions you will be mentioning so that they can look up the correct translation of them for the context of your speech. If you have a list, this will be **very** useful for the interpreters.
9. **Please avoid culture specific jokes, sarcasm or jargon**. Though it makes a speech more fun in one language, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to translate into an equivalently funny or sarcastic expression in the second language. The result is your message may be lost.
10. **Finally**, just remember that what we hear you say is what we interpret. We want to hear, understand and interpret your message.

Thank you for taking the time to read this set of tips. We hope it helps you understand the role of the interpreter and how to help us do the best interpretation possible for you.