



# The Entrepreneurial Linguist: The Art of Relationship-Building with Direct Clients

*By Judy A. Jenner*

**As linguists,** we excel in our understanding of the humanities and have in-depth knowledge of translation, both in theory and in practical application. However, what many of us have not thought about too much is how to build relationships with repeat customers, especially direct clients. It is quite resource-intensive to build and nurture these relationships, but they are worth the effort, both financially and from a professional satisfaction standpoint. This article will address ways to build relationships and secure repeat business with existing direct customers.

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## **The Power of Relationships**

While business school certainly does not provide a road map for starting your own small enterprise, I learned how to develop a marketing plan and to think very strategically about a business's growth. Colleagues frequently ask me about the most important lesson I learned in business school. For the mar-

keting side of our small businesses, I would say that the most relevant lesson is to know that your long-term success largely depends on the strength of the relationships you form with repeat customers.

Repeat customers are the clients every small business should strive for, as they will eliminate costs for new

customer acquisition. Building those relationships should be an integral part of any translation professional's marketing strategy. If your work is of very high quality, it will speak for itself and you will, most likely, be recommended. However, you should not rely solely on such endorsements for a marketing plan. In the long run, your marketing strategy will probably be a combination of referrals and actively acquiring new customers.

### Adjusting Your Mindset

Stop thinking of yourself as “just” a freelance linguist and start thinking of yourself as a business (whether you are incorporated or not). This mindset will help you manage your activities in a more strategic way.

**You are selling your services; therefore, you are a business. Start behaving like one!** A one-person business operated out of a spare room is just as legitimate as a Fortune 100 company. Most of your transactions will likely be on the so-called B2B (business-to-business) level, and you are an equal partner in these transactions. Give yourself a pat on the back—welcome to being an entrepreneur! If you need any help with incorporating (which has considerable tax benefits) or anything else, try using the free services offered by the Small Business Administration's SCORE division, where retired executives can help you with everything from creating a business plan to seeking loans. (See the links provided on page 15 for more information.)

**Think of yourself as a customer.** Now that you are thinking of yourself as a business, put yourself in the customers' shoes. If you were them, what would you want? This is an essential question that you must ask yourself frequently. Your goal is to make things

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easy for your customer and to build a solid working relationship. If you do not know what the customer wants, ask. A Post-it on my desk reminds me to think of myself as a customer, and every time a potential client calls or e-mails me for a quote, I ask myself: “If I were the person on the other side of the transaction, what would I want?” Seeing any business transaction from your customers' point of view is a powerful tool.

### Competitive Edge

It is important to find your competitive advantage. What are you really good at? What are you better at than your colleagues?

**Tell your potential customers what you excel at or what makes your translation services unique and desirable.** This is your competitive advantage. Many translators posting their services on large translation websites say “fast, reliable, good.” These really are not selling points, but only the bare minimum of what every purchaser of translation services should expect. If your customer sees 20 postings with these three adjectives, how will they choose? You guessed it—probably randomly. So what points will help you sell your services? Examples of competitive advantages include 24-hour service, working as a translation and editing team, and offering translation services on holidays.

**Learn from the pros.** For example, Target's competitive advantage is the fact that they are hip and edgy and are good corporate citizens, donating significant amounts to charity each month. Another example is the Swedish carmaker Volvo. Volvo's competitive advantage has always been safety, and their brand has become synonymous with high-end cars that consistently score very high on all consumer safety tests.

**Find out how you can add value to a customer's supply chain.** As a supplier, you already add value to the customer's business processes by providing linguistic services. However, to really impress clients, think of your value beyond mere translating. Businesses that enjoy stellar successes frequently do this, and you should do the same. Spend some time thinking about what specific additional benefits you can offer to customers. For example, for one of our customers, we know that we are the last link in a long chain of employees who work on printed materials before they go to press. Translation is the very last step, and we frequently find errors in the source text, which we gently but explicitly point out to the client. Thus, we save them money and ensure the quality of their source-language printed materials, even though it is not technically our job.

### Build Relationships with Customers

If you think of yourself as a ➡

business, you might surely realize that turning in a great product is not enough. Here are some more tips on how to enhance your client's experience.

**Follow up with a customer within a few days of turning in a project to see if he or she has any additional questions or if there is anything else you can do.** It is surprising how many contractors do not follow up on their work. Your clients will be delighted that you checked to see if there were any problems integrating your work into the final product, whatever it may be. Offer your assistance if there are any issues.

**If you know your customer is under time pressure, you could also deliver large projects in smaller batches, thus making the end processing easier on the customer.** This might not be that convenient for you, because in latter stages of the project and upon final revision you might change some terminology, but think of yourself as a customer.

**Check in with your favorite clients at the beginning of the month, asking them about the status of their projects so you might reserve adequate time for them.** This is not only a very proactive way to handle your business, but it also potentially gives you more control over your project flow.

**Become a customer "conciierge."** Keep information about your contact persons handy (e.g., is someone getting married or having a baby?). Just like any good hotel knows its customers' preferences for breakfast, pillows, and even entertainment, you need to learn enough about your customers to show them you care about them on a personal level. Consider sending holiday cards, baby shower gifts,

## 7 Main Points to Nurturing Client Relationships

1. You are selling your services. Therefore, you are a business. Behave like one.
2. Think of yourself as a customer. If you were a customer, what would you want?
3. Find your competitive advantage.
4. Develop good marketing materials.
5. Look at the time you invest in client acquisition as a long-term investment.
6. Go the extra mile for your clients. How can you add value to their businesses?
7. Allocate your time wisely.

or chocolates for a major holiday. We keep notes on our customers' preferences in a simple Excel spreadsheet.

**Go the extra mile.** Turn in a project early if you can. Volunteer to help your client find services you do not provide (other languages, specializations). Offer analysis and suggestions upon customer request. Be generous with your knowledge, even if you are not getting paid for it directly. Sometimes you have to give first.

**Reap the rewards.** Once you have built those relationships, your customers will be less sensitive to price. Customers want to receive good value for their money, and hopefully you will be such an integral part of their international strategy that someone who could offer services for slightly less will not be a feasible option for your client. In addition, customers also go through a cost-benefit analysis: if they

are happy with your services, it is infinitely less expensive for them to rely on your services again instead of searching for another vendor.

### Building a Brand

You will not be able to get repeat customers if they cannot remember your name or are unable to find you. Ideally, you want to be the first name that comes to mind when decision-makers are ready to hire a freelance translator. You can achieve this by building a brand and by making continuous contact. Here is your to-do list:

**Create a website and use an associated e-mail address.** With Google Sites, you can build your own template-based site and host it for \$10 per year. (It may not be top-of-the-line, but it will establish your online presence.) Choose a memorable business name and URL address that is easy to remember and non-generic.

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**Get a logo.** This does not have to be fancy or expensive—it could just be your initials. Have a Photoshop-savvy friend draw it or barter for the service with a graphic design student at the local community college.

**Put the logo everywhere.** Once you have a logo, make sure that it appears on your business cards, letterhead, quotes, invoices, and anything else you send. Reinforcing it is key.

**Maintain continuous and meaningful contact with clients.** This will be good for your relationship building, and it will also remind your customers once again who you are (and they will see your nice logo on your letterhead and return address label). A quick thank-you note (e-mail is fine) saying that you have received payment is also a good idea. For example, we routinely thank our best customers for their speedy processing of our invoices.

**Develop a simple public relations campaign.** Public relations is a time-consuming project, but the more you get your name out in the community, the more visible you are, thus increasing the chances of customers either remembering who you are (“Wasn’t she just in the business weekly this morning?”) or wanting to work with you based on the positive coverage you have received. Here are a few more ways to get your name out there:

- Pitch an article about your small business to your local paper.
- Ask your university alumni magazine to profile you.
- Write letters to the editor if you read an article about our profession and have an insightful comment to make.

### The New Networking

We have all been to many networking meetings, traditionally hosted by chambers of commerce and other professional organizations in the community. While those are certainly interesting events, they might not always yield new and meaningful contacts. The problem is one of supply and demand—there are too many sellers and not enough buyers. You might end up with a stack of business cards from fellow professionals

who have no intention of buying your services, as their goal was simply to get their business card into your hand. Consider changing the way you think about networking.

As a small business owner, you have to integrate your networking into your everyday life. I simply talk about what I do when asked at any event I attend, and very frequently, someone will tell me about someone who is looking for a translator. This just happened at a baby shower last week—who knew? I did not go to the baby shower with the intention of doing business, but many times life and business overlap. Be ready for it! As a business owner, you are never really off the clock.

### Time is What You Make of It

As a business that is providing a service, your only resource is your time. Use it wisely. Be sure to think about how and where you want to spend it. If you do that, you are on your way to thinking of yourself as a business owner and maximizing your time and your effort!

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## Useful Links

### Google Sites

[www.google.com/apps/intl/en/group/index.html](http://www.google.com/apps/intl/en/group/index.html)  
(Includes custom e-mail, such as [office@spanishwizards.com](mailto:office@spanishwizards.com).)

### VistaPrint

[www.vistaprint.com](http://www.vistaprint.com)  
(Buy the premium business cards)

### Small Business Administration SCORE

[www.score.org/index.html](http://www.score.org/index.html)