

Why a translation app isn't the answer for your business



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Every few weeks, another innovative new translation app is announced to help people around the world communicate. Waygo and Google's Word Lens let you hold your smartphone up to a sign or menu and get a real-time translation. So when you are at a business lunch in China, you can figure out what the menu is about so the meeting can stay about business and not the fact that you can't tell the pork from the turtle on the menu.

Twitter introduced Microsoft's Bing translation engine to translate tweets with the tap of a button - but they removed it again after two months. Microsoft's Skype Translator will be a real-time voice translator that will let you converse with someone in a completely different language. Planning ahead to the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics, Japan's NTT Docomo's Jspeak app will release a spoken translation app to ensure smooth communication with the locals.

But there's a big difference between basically understanding a food dish and basically understanding a business arrangement or a technical document. In most cases, translation apps can be handy for a quick grasp of what's going on, but not when you're making serious business or financial decisions based on the translation.

Putting Word Lens to the test

Experimenting with Word Lens on an instruction manual, we tried to translate English directions into Spanish. We came across a lot of phrases like "take to end the following procedure." While that might be enough for consumers to muddle through a website, anyone trying to figure out how to put together a manufacturing product or implement a software program is going to have a bit more trouble.

With all the excitement around these mobile apps - along with things like Microsoft's "Star Trek-like" translation capabilities for Skype - it's easy for companies to start wondering how this new technology can be applied to their businesses.

The legend of auto-translation

The fact is that these mobile apps are made for consumers and not for businesses that need to help customers use their products. If you're localising a product for a new market, the documentation has to be translated into that country's language. Relying on automatic technology to translate something complex like a manual for assembly-line heating equipment or a software analytics user interface can lead to a frustrating experience at best, and a lethal experience at worst.

Businesses that are expanding into new markets shouldn't rely on prospective customers to use apps to translate collateral like brochures and technical documents and websites.

A place for translation apps

This doesn't mean these innovative mobile technologies should be ignored altogether. An app like Waygo can be used in business meetings when a lack of understanding would otherwise hinder the progress of the client relationship.

If you're going global the best combination might be to hand a prospect a professionally localised brochure and use Waygo or Word Lens at the meeting table. These kinds of apps can be a boon for companies that don't have a translator or interpreter during lengthy business trips, but they should only complement the collateral that you bring on that trip, not replace it.

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