The Transcreation Process
Your business is expanding overseas. Your corporate, regulatory, and technical documents have already been translated. But what about your marketing materials? If you want to reach potential buyers in other countries, you can’t simply translate your domestic marketing materials. Your message needs to resonate with the culture of your audience. Think about the effort that goes into making advertising copy just right. Would you trust this process to a technical writer? Of course not. Marketing, public relations, and advertising copy connects at an emotional level. To reach consumers in their own language, you need more than just straight translation—you need “transcreation.” In this white paper, we outline what transcreation is, tell you what you’ll need to provide to your transcreation team in order to get the best results, and describe what you should expect from the process.
Why Transcreation?

The number one reason to invest in transcreation is to maintain control of your message. If you rely on foreign vendors and distributors to describe your product, you can never be sure how the message is being relayed. Transcreation is the process of tailoring marketing materials to appeal to a foreign audience while preserving the essential elements of your brand. Images, slogans, ad copy and taglines are creatively interpreted to capture the appropriate intent, style, and context for your message, be it humorous, sentimental, thrilling, or reassuring. The literal message may shift, but the important thing is that the tone and persuasive impact of the original is sustained in a way that appeals to a different culture.

The annals of international marketing are rife with examples of misfires in global advertising. For example, when KFC first entered China, their famous slogan “Finger-Licking Good” was translated as “eat your fingers off:” not an appealing image. In the late 90s, Air France urged business travelers to bring the spouse with the extraordinary slogan “Air France Wants You to Fly United.”

The second reason to invest in transcreation is to preserve the ROI of your initial marketing investment. Literal translation of your domestic marketing materials may not make your brand a laughing stock, but it may render months of creative work useless, because a culturally irrelevant message has no traction. The first step to creating impactful overseas advertising is to understand how to shop for transcreation.

“Finger-Licking Good” should NOT end up as “Eat Your Fingers Off”
Articulate your needs

Transcreation is really an umbrella term that covers a number of services which can be used to localize your message for another language and another culture. First, think about how much you want to invest in the process, and how extensive the transcreation needs to be. If your product is highly technical, and your advertising is targeted to a narrow audience of experts, you will have different needs than a consumer brand seeking a larger audience through online, print, or broadcast media.

Does your marketing material rely heavily on storytelling and imagery, or is the appeal based on facts and product attributes? If the latter is true, and sales are driven by technical considerations, you may need minimal transcreation services. But if your message needs to resonate at an emotional level, as with most consumer advertising, you may need more extensive transcreation. Your language services partner can help you design your transcreation strategy based on your needs and the needs of your audience.

There are three tiers or categories of work under the overall umbrella of “transcreation.” Each tier takes progressively more time and effort.
**Tier 1: Copy Finishing**

The most basic type of transcreation is “copy finishing.” This is an additional editorial step, taken after translation of your text, by in-country professional copywriters. Copy finishing is typically performed after translation by a bilingual or monolingual professional in-country copywriter. An example of material needing copy finishing might be promotional materials for heavy equipment or chemicals, where the text first needs to be translated by a subject matter expert or technical translator, but the client also wants the copy to flow in a natural, appealing way. This is where copy finishing by a native language copywriter is your best resource. The deliverable for this process will be the translated and copy-finished text with both technical accuracy and aesthetic appeal.
Tier 2: Pre-Translation Assessment and Source Preparation

A second level of transcreation requires pre-translation assessment and source preparation. In this case, you are adapting your marketing materials for another culture, but you are holding onto the basic concepts of your domestic marketing campaign. In addition to assessing the relevance of the concept, images, colors, fonts, and overall design will be reviewed to point out possible unappealing or confusing elements. The first idea behind pre-translation assessment and source preparation is that it will ensure that you are not negatively impacting the audience.

While pointing out elements that may misfire, the cultural consultant also makes recommendations for alternative strategies to improve your message. For example, we performed pre-translation assessment for an industrial supply company whose material targeted buyers at medical facilities in thirteen different countries. Our in-country cultural consultants made a point by point assessment of the marketing materials. Suggestions for alternative images, colors, fonts, and word choices were also made.

A client can be surprised by the findings of pre-translation cultural consulting. For example:

• Our Finnish reviewer pointed out that the English copy was too casual and “familiar”—in Finnish medical facilities, a more formal tone would be appropriate.

• Our Chinese reviewer was unfamiliar with, and a bit alarmed by, the caduceus—the winged staff with two snakes entwined—which is a highly recognizable symbol of the medical industry in the U.S., but not universally recognizable in China.

• Finally, our Ukrainian reviewer tagged an image of a world map whose regional boundaries followed the old Soviet Bloc boundaries, and suggested the boundaries be shifted to avoid any political implications.
Tier 2: Pre-Translation Assessment (cont)

After the client received feedback from consultants in the countries in which they planned to market, they were able to create more globally aware marketing materials.

Source preparation focuses more closely on language and wording. If your marketing text is culturally savvy and tailored for a domestic audience, it will include turns of phrase and nuanced word choices that might be confusing or nonsensical when translated into another language. A cultural consultant would review the written materials and tag the idiomatic speech that you need to change before translating.

If your text was written with a specific type of person in mind, you can almost guarantee that it will be deeply Americanized throughout. In this case, the source text is prepared by stripping out the culturally specific references and replacing them with references that make sense to the culture you want to reach. An example of material needing this treatment would be scripts for employee training videos, which have been “flavored” with humor and cultural references to make them more engaging. For example, a script might include a character asking another character whether he preferred the Yankees or the Red Sox. This reference would need to be replaced with an analogous legendary rivalry in the target country that would be easily recognized.

After source preparation by a bicultural consultant, the deliverable will be a stripped-down English document which can be reviewed by the client, then sent for translation and in-country copy finishing. The benefits of source preparation are best realized by employing a truly bicultural team who will “get” the American references and be able to substitute analogous references and idioms from the target culture.
Tier 3: Full Treatment Transcreation

A third level, “Full treatment” transcreation, may result in the complete revision of your marketing campaign, with the intention of communicating with consumers or buyers in another culture using not just another language, but another set of concepts tailored to the audiences you want to reach. Global brands like Subaru, Nike, and Apple routinely create new advertising and marketing campaigns to appeal to other cultures. For example, a recent Apple commercial for China focused on the important Chinese cultural value of intergenerational bonding, as a girl re-creates music from her grandmother’s youth on an iPad. In addition to having been made in China by a Chinese creative team, the ad was tested with Chinese focus audiences to be sure it struck the right chord.

While you may not have Apple’s needs (or budget) you’ll want to consider whether you are really maximizing your impact in a foreign market. Full treatment transcreation involves discussions with your transcreation team, several rounds of creative work and review, and possibly market research in the form of in-country focus groups and concept-testing with target audiences. Your language services partner should be able to tell you honestly how much or how little of each of these elements meets your particular needs.
Full Service Transcreation: The Creative Brief

For full treatment and creative work, you will first need to develop a creative brief for your transcreation team. A creative brief is similar to the background information required by a creative agency tasked with developing a domestic marketing or ad campaign. You should expect to provide answers to the following questions:

1) Who is the target audience? What are their demographics—age, sex, education, income, family status? What impels them to pay attention to your marketing materials and why would they use the product? With what other brands do they identify, and why? You may be asked to provide “personas”—descriptions of characters who represent qualities of your target market.

2) What is the product or brand being advertised? How is your product or brand marketed and perceived domestically or in other countries? What does your product do? What problem does your product solve?

3) What are the objectives of the communication itself? Are you issuing a direct invitation to purchase a particular product online or in a store? Are you attempting to gather information about prospective buyers? In short: What is the communication asking the audience to do?

4) In what medium and what contexts will the communication appear? Print? Online? Display advertising? Package labeling? Video?

5) Additional materials: Any additional materials that could help flesh out the concept will be welcome: related content, storyboards, style guides, an overview of the reviewing schedule (will concepts be tested in focus groups, for example?) and, of course, a timeline for delivery and project completion, including possible additional rounds for review and revision.
Full Service Transcreation: The Creative Process

Once the transcreation team has reviewed your creative brief, they may want to schedule a conference call to resolve any remaining questions and be sure they have a firm grasp of your brand attributes and messaging strategy.

The team will then arrange a brainstorming session among themselves. Depending on your needs and your budget, focus groups might be convened to test initial ideas. From these efforts, several versions of what you need—slogans, headlines, scripts, visuals—will be developed for your review. Throughout the process, the team will keep notes on the comments and suggestions made throughout the process, and you will receive a full report including:

1) Several choices of your deliverables in the target language
2) Back-translations (literal English translations) of the deliverables
3) Rationales and comments—full explanations of the strengths and drawbacks of each choice, with explanations (in English) of what cultural references are being made, what they mean for the target culture, and why the team chose them.

You may take the opportunity for in-country review. A review by colleagues in-country may strengthen your message. We can provide you with guidelines for conducting the review, or we can conduct the review through our network of in-country cultural consultants.

Once you have reviewed and discussed the options, you can give the transcreation team any additional feedback they need to help them develop the final version. Additional rounds of in-country review, whether by focus groups or through individual testing, can be a means to further refine your message.
But how much will it cost?

The time required for multiple iterations of creative work is sometimes hard to quantify in advance. However, an experienced transcreation team should be able to make general estimates based on your budget and your needs, and charge on an hourly basis. The complexity of the task, the volume of the marketing material, and the number of review cycles necessary to perfect the deliverable are key variables.

For example, a client commissioned transcreation for a series of taglines, and asked us to provide a full set of three alternatives for each tagline, including back translations, and rationales. However, the process revealed that although they could be translated, the format of the taglines was not “working” in Mandarin, and that the client needed to re-think the structure of the campaign. While this might seem frustrating at first, the creative process of the first transcreation round ensured that the re-structured campaign was much more relevant to the target audience.

Deciding what level of transcreation you need is a bit more complicated than straight technical translation, and requires expertise in the area of creative copywriting. Whether you need simple copy finishing, pre-translation consulting, or full service transcreation is a question that can be decided in partnership with your language service partner.

In our globalizing marketplace, the demand for transcreation is increasing. To ensure that your carefully developed marketing strategy is appealing and persuasive, be sure to choose a language services partner with demonstrated expertise in the area of transcreation. Here at MTM LinguaSoft, we want to help you create marketing materials that will accomplish your goals within a budget that works for you.