

Getting Your Foot in the Door and Walking with Confidence: How interpreters can market themselves professionally

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The field of ASL-English interpretation and translation is strengthening every day, as we continue to develop our image as specialists, researchers, and entrepreneurs. Given the high demand for services and the short supply of service providers, it seems that employment opportunities abound for professional ASL-English interpreters and translators. However, consumers' expectations and employers' requirements are also changing with the times, and interpreters need to consciously market themselves as dynamic candidates in the business world.

It is important that interpreters have the self-determination to take control of how we work and with whom we work. Although it does not seem likely that a qualified interpreter would be totally unemployed, it does seem probable that an interpreter may feel pressured to follow the rules established by local employers instead of best practices set by research and professional organizations. This article is a brief discussion of how interpreters may choose a compatible employer/referral agency, what employers look for in ideal applicants, and how to set the stage for long-term professional alliances.

The typical interview between an interpreter and a hiring entity is a complex balance of power dynamics. Traditionally, the interpreter was seen as the applicant who was subordinate to the interviewer. However, due to the current realities of supply, demand, and competition, the agency must be just as prepared as the interpreter. By viewing this event as the overture to a *partnership* (as opposed to a symbiotic relationship), the interpreter and interviewer can evaluate their counterpart's assets and limitations. Both parties will then decide whether to negotiate the terms of the partnership or to politely go their separate ways.

Consider the following ideas before interviewing with any company that is interested in forging a business relationship with you:

Network with colleagues and consumers.

Make sure you will be proud to represent (and be represented by) the candidate agency. Contact the state affiliate and local chapter of RID in your area, and ask local interpreters for their perspectives. Attend Deaf community events and ask about the community's outlook on the agency's services.

Compile a portfolio.

Create a resource that will impress prospective colleagues. Include your resume as a snapshot of your background, as well as a 360-degree view of your qualities - details about your training and mentorship experiences, letters of recommendation from consumers, peers and instructors, publications, and an overview of the settings in which you have experience and expertise. Keep detailed records of your previous employment and professional development activities. Include a recorded sample of your interpreting work. If you have a specialization area, develop a portfolio of resources for these assignments (i.e. fact sheets, brochures, standard practice papers, etc.) Share this information with the interviewer in order to illustrate your professional knowledge and beliefs.

Have high expectations of the interviewer.

In order to protect your reputation and livelihood, you should be concerned about affiliating yourself with an unscrupulous company. Be prepared for the interview to include an observation of your interpreting skills. If it is not required by the interviewer, it needs to be required by *you*. In order to ensure a standard of quality, we need to be open about the strengths and weaknesses of our work.

Establish yourself as an expert.

Be assertive when explaining standard business practices in interpreting. Although interpreting is an ever-expanding field, the process of hiring an interpreter is still a challenge for inexperienced employers. Some hiring entities expect interpreters to come to them, and they may not advertise publicly. If you recognize that a potential employer is unaware of current business practices, take the opportunity to set an appropriate precedent with this organization.

Create your Terms of Service.

Proactively establish your business expectations and ethical boundaries before seeking employment or contracting with a specific entity. Put your specific terms of service in writing – minimum rates, required notice for cancellation, team interpreting needs, preparation needs, pro bono policies, and your level of flexibility to negotiate. Only work with a company if their policies and procedures fall within the reasonable range of your terms. Do not make any commitments until you are comfortable that your terms are satisfied. Fill out all required paperwork and read their policy handbook before accepting any assignments.

Value the equal importance of both perspectives.

Interpreter Perspective	Interviewer Perspective
<p>PROFESSIONALISM What credentials are required to work for the agency? What are the agency’s views on competition? Does the agency send unqualified interpreters to assignments? Does the agency provide incentives and resources for professional development?</p> <p>REPUTATION Does the agency have a good reputation with consumers, organizations, and interpreters in the area? Are they known for their ethical and fair business practices? How many interpreters work for them full time? Part-time? As needed? Does the agency provide advocacy to members of the Deaf community?</p>	<p>PROFESSIONALISM Most community interpreters work with little supervision, guided by the Code of Professional Conduct, agency policies, and basic common sense. Agencies expect them to be trustworthy and to know when to be self-sufficient, when to ask for assistance, and when to defer to others.</p> <p>CREDENTIALS Professional interpreting credentials serve as a benchmark for employers to gauge an interpreter’s skill level and linguistic fluency. Non-credentialed practitioners are typically unqualified for most settings, and function as a liability to the agency.</p>

Interpreter Perspective	Interviewer Perspective
<p>SUPPORT Does the agency have a handbook with clear expectations? Does the agency send team interpreters for assignments with dense content and/or more than one hour of active interpreting? Can interpreters call for backup at any time? Does the assignment coordinator provide enough pre-assignment information to let the interpreter consider his or her suitability? Do they provide textbooks and other prep materials for interpreting assignments? Does the agency provide health insurance benefits, worker's compensation, liability insurance, and/or retirement savings?</p> <p>COMPENSATION What are the agency's payroll categories? (e.g. staff, part-time employees, independent contractors) Does the agency pay in a timely and consistent manner? Are their pay rates fair and consistent? Is direct deposit an option for employees? What are the agency's policies about invoices and other required paperwork? What are their policies for no-shows or cancellations within less than 48 hours? Do they pay higher rates for nights, weekends, and last minute assignments? Do they compensate employees for travel time, mileage, parking, tolls, etc.? Do they offer on-call services? If so, how is this arranged and compensated? Do they pay for preparation time for assignments?</p>	<p>EDUCATION Education is an extremely important component of an interpreter's background. Interpreter training provides a foundation for understanding cognitive processes, as well as a standard lexicon for theories, concepts, and techniques. This training can be attained through universities, colleges, mentorships, workshops, and conferences. A degree and is an invaluable asset, and will soon be required by RID as a minimum standard.</p> <p>FLUENCY An interpreter should possess bilingual (or multilingual) fluency. He or she should be comfortable communicating in a variety of situations and registers in each language. Cultural knowledge related to each language community is also critical.</p> <p>EXPERIENCE Professional experience is valuable for practitioners of interpreting services. The skills necessary to apply theory to practice and to work in high-pressure situations must be honed over time. Authentic world-knowledge and the commitment to life-long learning are also necessary assets for interpreters.</p> <p>SUITABILITY Although an interpreter's professionalism, credentials, education, fluency, and experience are extremely important, they do not always provide a complete portrayal of an interpreter's skills. A seemingly qualified interpreter may be unsuitable for certain assignments due to conflicts of interest, consumers' requests, and the interpreter's personal preferences.</p>

Reputable interpreting agencies align themselves with interpreters who are qualified, ethical, dependable, honest, flexible, resourceful, organized, and professional in appearance and conduct. The interpreter has the right to expect these same qualities in the agency and its staff. By candidly marketing ourselves as knowledgeable experts, we will be more likely to attract professional partnerships and to defuse unnecessary conflicts.

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