

The virtuous circle of feedback

Freelancers who receive positive feedback feel more motivated and engaged, and produce better work for their clients. Reason enough to pass on favourable comments whenever possible, says James Kelly



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No news is good news, or so they say. Like many translators, I am frequently left with the impression that much of the work I do disappears into a black hole. On the rare occasions a client gets back to me, it's normally because they want to query a certain aspect of the work. Moreover, this lack of feedback persists even when I ask to know how I'm doing. Most follow-up emails asking clients if they are happy with my translations or have any feedback are met by a perfunctory 'excellent, really happy with your work'.

Feeling valued

It's not always this way, however. Although I've now lost it, an agency once sent me an email to tell me the end client had been in touch to say how happy they were with my work. It was a nice feeling. I felt valued by the client and agency alike, and the upshot was that for the next few jobs I did for them, I felt more engaged with the work and took greater pride in what I was doing, spurred on by the knowledge that this wasn't just one of those texts that vanished into the ether when I clicked 'Send'. In short, it temporarily increased my motivation, making me more willing to go that extra mile, spend a little bit longer researching those difficult terms, polish the text a little more before sending it off and provide helpful comments for the reviewer. But it wasn't long before the magic

began to fade and it was back to business as usual.

Thinking back to my Business Studies lectures at university, this is logical. Although I didn't think much of them at the time, some of the pearls of wisdom I gleaned from the course, such as US psychologist Abraham Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs, have resonated with me since I started working as a freelancer. For those who are unfamiliar with it, Maslow's hierarchy of needs is based on five ascending levels (I've used parentheses to relate them to translation):

1. Physiological needs (the food required to keep us alive)
2. Safety needs (security of employment and financial stability)
3. Social needs (being part of a community such as ITI)
4. Esteem needs (the sense of respect and self-confidence that comes from feeling valued)
5. Self-actualisation (reaching one's

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full potential, eg through CPD).

When it comes to clients, especially agencies, a significant proportion of my relationships go no further than the second level, with the reward for my work being in purely monetary terms. The needs of levels three and five, as noted above, are met by participating in the professional community and through continuing professional development activities. This leaves level four.

The feeling I experienced when I received that spontaneous compliment in my inbox was essentially an injection of esteem, perhaps all the more potent since we receive them so rarely. In the absence of such moments, it would seem that translators are largely deprived of a valuable source of this essential aspect of Maslow's 'Theory of Human Motivation'. Worse still, in the case of a colleague who recently had to spend a number of hours unpicking errors and battling changes made to one of their translations by a non-native reviewer, esteem can easily slip into the red.

Motivation and satisfaction

By now readers might be forgiven for thinking this is just another case of the hard done by, undervalued translator venting their spleen. Yet as we all know, there are two sides to every coin. By far one of the largest implications of this situation is for clients themselves. The central premise of Maslow's theory is that motivated workers deliver the best results. A motivated translator is a good translator, one who is engaged with and cares about their work. By providing positive feedback to their suppliers, translation buyers can ensure they get the best out of their translators. This leads to more satisfied clients, who are in turn more likely to return to a specific language service provider, and translators who are more engaged with their work. A virtuous circle in which everyone's a winner.

The challenge, then, is making clients, particularly agencies, see the value of taking the time to provide meaningful feedback to their suppliers on a regular basis, and not just when something goes wrong. If you're happy with somebody's work, let them know. 