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Business

## Client-vendor lessons from iStock's localization program

*Michael Smith & Gary Muddyman*

If you told iStockphoto, commonly known as iStock, three years ago that by 2009 they'd have corporate clients in Moscow, nobody would have believed you. But not only does iStock now count Russian companies among its corporate clients, it has strong business partnerships in Japan, a thriving Polish user community and a Spanish-speaking audience from Latin America to Europe.

iStock is one of the ongoing success stories of the digital age, being the pioneers of crowdsourcing and the micropayment system in the royalty-free stock photography world. It had absolutely cornered the market in North America by 2006, and the only way to go was global. This was a company that wanted to expand internationally, and fast, but had no expertise when it came to localization. The following back and forth should shed some light on the vendor-client relationship in the context of ambitious client expansion.

### Localizing a crowdsourced platform

**Smith:** iStock is the world's first member-generated image and design community. Crowdsourcing is, by definition, the use of hobbyists on a large scale as a source of production. In fact, Jeff Howe, the *Wired* journalist who coined the term *crowdsourcing*, counts iStock as one of the inventors of the phenomenon. iStock contributors share a passion for their craft. They're our



iStock is in the process of localizing its website.

"crowd" of over 78,000 worldwide, reaching more than five million customers. We recently added the five-millionth file to our collection. Thanks to the support from our parent company, Getty Images, we've grown with our crowd. We originally localized from US English into three languages – French, German and Spanish – and have since added six more – Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Brazilian Portuguese, Polish and Russian. We're also searchable in Greek and UK English, for a total of 12 languages.

In the world of e-commerce, you're global from the moment your site goes online. As early as 2006, there were translations being done to some site content. I believe it was by machine at first – this was before my time – and then eventually we had users translating site content. In other words, we were crowdsourcing our translation.

One of the things that we found was that dialect differences caused a problem. For example, Canadian French wasn't going over well with the French members and things like that. It was an imperfect system, so they created my position in 2007 and that's when we started working with Conversis.



*Michael Smith is a language specialist at iStockphoto.*



*Gary Muddyman is CEO of Conversis.*

I know crowdsourcing translation is very popular at the moment, but it didn't work for us at the time. We needed something a bit more structured from a partner with a dedication to high-quality results. We also needed a translation team with a passion for being creative that could match our own – one that could really sink their teeth into our unique corporate culture.

**Muddyman:** This is not as easy as it sounds. If you think of a traditional piece of marketing collateral, like a brochure, for example, it flows. But people don't consume web copy in that way. They read in bite-sized chunks. If you have a page or even two to three paragraphs, you then have the chance to get into a flow or almost take somebody through a story. That's an easier piece of copy to write than if you have to encapsulate it in a sharp, snappy sentence. iStock is about selling images, so it's even more important because you have to encapsulate what you're seeing. That takes real expertise. We have to look for creative people who have the ability to copywrite in a foreign language rather than just translate.

**Smith:** And we have learned some lessons there in terms of how important it is to get the right translators. But I think we now have reliable translators who know our business well.

iStock has presence everywhere in the world. It seems like everywhere I go, someone is an iStock client or contributor. I can remember once while I was in South America, I was asked who I work for, and in a conversation among people from four different countries, it turned out all of them were iStock clients. We're everywhere!

### The in-house localization expert debate

**Muddyman:** There is no straightforward answer as to when to have a localization expert in-house. For me it's not about whether it is essential or necessary, but whether it is preferable. As a supplier, we would like to say we can fill the knowledge gap, but for us it is preferable to have someone who has some localization expertise on the client side because with that comes the awareness of whether localization is done well or poorly.

I'll give you an example of what I mean. Let's say a clothing retailer is doing well in the United Kingdom and decides to expand into Europe. There's a really poor job done on the localization of the brand and marketing, and the company goes under. The trouble is, that company will never know what it would have earned if it had done the localization job well. And if there is no expertise at all, it may not even be able to point to the reason for the failure – which, as we know, is down to a poor localization job.

A localization professional has to be able to make the French customer feel just as important as the British one and make the French marketing as effective as the British marketing. It sounds simple, but it is incredible how often companies get this wrong.

Having said that, I would point out that for us, working with a localization expert such as Michael is more challenging than working with someone who knows nothing because there's a



The top grossing iStock image, with over 16,000 downloads. The contributor is from Spain.

restlessness and a demand from somebody who knows where "it" is that there isn't from somebody who may have a different job full-time. I think what happens is that Michael and other localization professionals are able to challenge us in a way that people who only do it for part of their job are unable to do. This isn't to say that one's better than another; it just means that they've got different roles. By completely focusing on this space, you've got a level of expertise that enables challenges. It's that process of challenging and pushing the boundaries that I think certainly affects the outcome for the better.

### Overcoming bumps in the road

**Muddyman:** There have been obstacles, with translators needing some guidance with context for their copy, for example, but Michael and Gosia Gizak, our project manager, have found ways to overcome them. There's never been much out of the ordinary for a company in the beginning stages of localization. Those issues have been fewer and farther between as iStock has brought more expertise into its ranks.

**Smith:** Gosia and I have constant feedback, both ways. The localization kit includes a phone call when necessary so that I can make it a point to provide as much information as possible for context so the translators can do their work accurately and efficiently. Mock-ups, such as screen shots and the like, are now required from our project managers before I send new material to be translated. Those eliminate most of the queries before they're made now. Gosia facilitates questions and answers between the translators and me, if there are any.

Usually, by the time I've sent the files for translation I have read the source text over a few times. I always think "OK, now how would I translate this?" and any words or terms that stump me get added to a list of project notes and sent along. I also get Conversis to do more testing of deliverables than previously.

The project management team at iStock headquarters consult me often now, so I usually have a good feel for a project by the time I get to do my magic on it.

The translations get reviewed by our in-country iStockers where we can – we're too cool to say "staff." We have a constant

flow of files, so the revisions made go live before they get back to Conversis. Periodically, those are sent back so that the translators get meaningful feedback to guide their work.

I've also done some tweaking to internal processes to make things run more smoothly and better communicate the project needs to those involved. It sounds complicated and drawn out, but the reviewers with longevity will tell you that the quality of translation improves exponentially over time.

**Muddyman:** As I said before, it's a specialist piece of work, so we try to use the same team of translators, and they now know iStock very well. They know the requirements and the service, and they don't have to keep asking for context. So the process has become much easier over time. I guess you learn from each client that you have. Without being sycophantic, the major lesson from working with iStock is how much more productive it is when you're working with a client who is both informed and as keen on developing the relationship as you are.

Michael in particular is so open. His objective is to find the most cost-effective, productive and professional way to do this. And so if that means we need to suggest changes to the way iStock does things to make things better for the company, then he welcomes the suggestion. And that is very different from some clients, not all, but different from some clients who say, "You're the vendor. You'll do it in the way we ask or not at all."

**Smith:** The truth is, I am results-oriented, so if there's something on my side that I can do to make the process easier for the external employees, it really is helping out iStock in the long run.

For me, feedback and communication in both directions are not optional. We have developed a productive relationship, and this has meant we've had an invaluable source of support as we've done things like taking on more non-English content authoring in-house and completely overhauling terminology management processes. I'd like to think Conversis has learned that not all content their clients publish is boring! Most importantly, I think one of the things we've all learned is that clients and vendors work best together, not separately.

## On future challenges and personal relationships

**Smith:** Obviously the more linguistically and culturally diverse we are, the more challenging localization will be. While I can't give specifics on next steps, I'd always advise respecting your audience; it's the best way to make them your clients.

**Muddyman:** I see a key part of our role as helping iStock stay ahead of the curve. Michael talks about respecting your audience, and for me that's about respecting and understanding their cultural differences, buying habits, the way they do business, the way they like to have buying solutions presented to them. Actually managing that process is going to be a challenge, but it's also going to be rewarding.

There are plenty of successful business relationships that I've had in the past without there being a healthy personal relationship



One of the first files on the site, contributed by the founder of iStock.

in it, but it does make it easier. Because Michael and I have a good personal relationship, if I need to tell him something that I think needs to be said, then I don't worry much about how I phrase it. I am just honest with him, and the same in return. If he has a problem with us, then I would expect him to pick up the phone and call me out on it.

**Smith:** And yes, I'd totally call Gary if I needed someone to post bail or help me in a sticky situation. I'm pretty sure he has half of MI-5 on speed dial.

Seriously though, most localization project managers on

the client side will tell you that they spend the majority of their time doing administrative tasks. Because of that trust, I don't have to focus on administration, and I can spend more time on improving processes and the scope of our program.

Clients and vendors in this field have such different perspectives that the insight is invaluable. I think that's called "professional competence," no matter what your vocation. Localization is growing so fast that it can be hard to keep up.

I find, though, that the information exchange can go both ways. I'll often read some newsletter or get some info sent my way, and after I do my own research, I'll ask Gosia what her take is. Sometimes she'll be well-informed; at other times it's the first she's heard about whatever bit of information. If ever I'm stumped on where to look for information, they know where to refer me.

## The indicators of success

**Smith:** I know localization has been a success at iStock because the program is growing and localization is demystified for more people in the company, not to mention our growing international community.

Converts who have really no role in the process can at least understand its purpose. It's not uncommon for people who aren't involved in localization on the client side to see it as a bottleneck. At iStock headquarters, those people come and ask questions. That speaks volumes about the program and the company it's housed in.

I also have no shortage of "thank you" notes that I share with Conversis for a job well done. That said, our community of clients is also not shy about offering tips for improvement either.

**Muddyman:** I certainly don't feel like it's a done job. iStock is a dynamic business. The demands of the market that they're in, the demands of the company and the dynamism of the individuals we deal with in that company continually bring challenges. One of the worst things we could do is sit back on our laurels.

I guess if I look to success, it's that we have managed to, in a relatively short space of time, develop a relationship that fosters this spirit of wanting to be better and do things better all the time. As their business develops and expands, the infrastructure that we've got in place enables us to develop and expand with them. I think that has taken a lot of commitment and good intent on both sides, and that's rewarding. **M**