Simultaneous Interpretation Buyer's Guide

Introduction

Navigating the world of conference interpretation for the uninitiated can be a daunting experience. This Buyer's Guide is designed to help first time buyers understand what to look for when contracting conference interpreting services and prepare budgets accordingly. Let's start off by defining some key terms so that there is no confusion from the start. There is often confusion between the terms *translator* and *interpreter*. Translators convey one language into another in written form while interpreters do so verbally. So we will only be discussing interpreters in this guide. Furthermore, there are two types of conference interpretation: simultaneous and consecutive.

Simultaneous interpretation is the process of interpreting from one language into another at the same time as the presenter is speaking. This type of interpretation is best suited for professional conferences, presentations and theatrical events. This method allows the presenter to speak at a normal pace and will not slow down an event.

Consecutive interpretation is a method which allows the presenter to speak for a short period of time, usually less than a minute. Then the interpreter renders the message into the target language. This type of interpretation is best suited for one-on-one situations, small group meetings, short presentations and telephone interpreting. The time required to provide the interpretation is generally as long as, or longer than, the original message. Remember to factor in this additional time when determining the time required for such a presentation.

Throughout the rest of this guide, we will only deal with simultaneous interpretation services since that is the only type of interpretation that is generally used in large events.

Getting the Interpreters

You have lined up a top-notch panel of speakers and presenters for your conference, booked a great venue, and prepared everything you can to make the event a success. Don't let your international attendees down by providing poor interpreting services. While simultaneous interpreters are not cheap, cutting costs here has the potential of ruining the conference experience for your guests relying on the interpretation. Simultaneous interpreters are the best of the best when it comes to interpreting. Many have provided services for hundreds of conferences across the world and some even work with the United Nations, the federal government and major international organizations. You need to have a budget that allows for this. It is not possible to give a precise figure since rates vary by language, region and specialty. However, if you do find companies who offer simultaneous interpretation services for dramatically less than all of the others, beware! They are cutting costs somewhere, and it will likely be to your detriment. Bargain rates often come with interpreters that have little or no experience, or who have no simultaneous interpretation background. While everyone understands the importance of a budget for conferences, if you cannot afford to put on a great interpretation for your attendees, then why risk your organization's reputation?

To consider: *All simultaneous interpreters work in teams.*

Why do I need two interpreters? That's a common question from clients the first time they request conference interpretation services. Simultaneous interpretation is an incredibly arduous and mentally-fatiguing process. Interpreters must listen to the speaker's message while also simultaneously rendering the interpretation over the speaker's voice. This is the same type of interpretation which is done at the United Nations. As such, each interpreter will work for 20-30 minutes and then trade off with his

or her *booth partner*. Doing so ensures that you are always getting the best possible interpretation. If you will need interpreters for substantially more than eight hours a day, you might even need a third interpreter or separate team since few interpreters are willing to work over 10 hours in a day.

To consider: *Will you need interpretation services in more than one location at the same time, such as breakout sessions? If so, you will need another set of interpreters for the other room.*

Some interpreters will also have certification from various bodies such as International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) or degrees in interpretation such as from Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. Expect such certifications to come at a premium. Most interpreters have decades of experience which can easily supplant certification. Any seasoned simultaneous interpreter will be able to provide a long list of conferences where he/she has interpreted, as well as numerous references.

If your conference is technical in nature, such as medical, scientific or legal, be sure that the interpreters you contract have a background in the field and experience interpreting at technical conferences.

Regardless of the event, it is essential that the interpreters receive copies of the presentations at least a week in advance of the conference so that they can review them and properly prepare for the event. Also consider whether you will need to have any of the materials translated into various languages for your foreign attendees. Translation turnaround times can be long on large files so plan accordingly and budget for this, too.

To consider: *For multiday events, interpreters will expect to receive a per diem and possibly even travel time to and from the event. This is important to include in your budget.*

Simultaneous Interpreting Equipment

Let's look at what equipment you might need. Nowadays there are very elaborate set-ups available for different venues, but typically simultaneous interpretation conferences will require some or all of the following: interpreting booths, transmitters, receivers, interpreter console and video monitors (if no line-of-sight to the presenters).

Interpreter Booths

To begin, you will need one interpreter booth, also referred to as a cabin, for each of the languages interpreted at you conference. Booths are some type of enclosure to keep extraneous sounds away from the interpreters, as well as to prevent the interpreters' voices from bothering nearby attendees. There are two types of booths to consider: tabletop and full-size.

A full-size booth, like pictured above, is a fully-enclosed 6'x4' soundproof booth which is designed to accommodate two interpreters. This type of enclosure is typically what is requested for large conferences. It provides very effective sound insulation from into and out of the booth, allows a clear view of the stage and gives the interpreters a place to set up their laptops and a place for the interpreter console, microphones and video monitors, if needed. Keep in mind that you will need one booth for each language (team of interpreters).

A tabletop booth is an economical and space-saving option for clients with tight spaces or budgets. Such tabletop booths typically measure about 4 feet by 30 inches and are open in the back which is where the interpreters sit. They rest on top of a typical 6'x30" table. They have Plexiglas windows on three sides for viewing of the event. Set-up time on these is minimal and they are less expensive to ship than a larger 500-lb full-size booth. If you decide to go with this type, be sure that the interpreters are sufficiently positioned away from the audience, yet able to see the entire stage. Typically, this is used for events with only one language being interpreted.

To consider: If your budget is tight, you might be able to get away with skipping the booth if you have a large room where they can sit. This is not optimal, and definitely requires high-quality non-canceling headphones. If you have soundproof room for the interpreters, this is also a budget-saving option. You must provide a clear video feed of the presenters in such a case and a way to get the audio into that room with an XLR cable.

Wireless Transmission Equipment

You will need a way to deliver the interpretation from the booth to your audience. This is done by transmitting the interpretation from each of the booths to your attendees, each of whom has a receiver. It is common to transmit the interpretation in the 72-76 MHz range, just under the standard FM radio range. As such, this is often referred to as an FM system. An FM system provides excellent coverage for long distances ensuring that the signal is strong in every location where you will have people listening. This type of signal penetrates walls so if highly sensitive material being discussed, you might want to use an infrared system (IR). An IR system uses infrared light waves to send the signal to the audience. This type of signal does not penetrate walls and will be completely contained within the room. It does, however, require several IR *emitters* (light-emitting transmitters) placed high enough above the audience to ensure complete coverage. The sound on such as system is excellent as long as you are within line-of-sight of one of the emitters. Bear in mind that the cost to rent a complete IR system and have it set up are much higher than a standard FM system. There are also some new systems that send the interpretation out by Wi-Fi to apps on a smartphone.

Inside of the interpreter booth, there will be an interpreter console, similar to the picture to the right. This is a device that allows the interpreters to control what goes out to the audience. The audio from the floor (speaker) goes directly into the console so that each interpreter can increase or decrease the volume as needed. There are two 'interpret' buttons that each interpreter can press when they are interpreting, as well as a mute button to stop all sound from being transmitted. In more elaborate, multilingual set-ups the interpreter console also serves to connect several different booths together in order to allow *relay interpretation*. This is important to know some presenters will not speak English. Relay interpretation is used when a presenter does not speak English. As an example, if you have three languages being interpreted, say Spanish, French and Arabic, if one of the presenters begins to speak in Arabic, then the Arabic interpretation team can flip the relay switch on the interpreter console thereby sending the English interpretation of the presenter out over the Arabic channel to the English audience, as well as to the Spanish and French interpreters, who in turn interpret the message into those languages.

Pre-conference Support

You will want to have a pre-conference planner from the language company you select. The planner will go through all of the linguistic details of the event with you well in advance, and help prepare a budget for your organization. This person will handle the often chaotic task of interpreter logistics since in many situations, interpreters will be arriving from different parts of the country or the world. As such, booking flights, arranging lodging and transportation all will need to be considered. This process can be daunting. Remember if you do have interpreters flying in, you need to anticipate possible flight delays or cancelations due the weather (snow, hurricanes, etc.). None of these concerns apply if you are able to source interpreters locally. Your pre-conference planner will also arrange for delivery and set-up of the booths and equipment, optimal placement of the booths based on the space available, as well as acting as the sole point of contact prior to the conference.

Technical Support

Once you have gotten the interpreters and equipment squared away, and have a pre-conference planner on board to keep everything on track, there is one final item you cannot omit, technical support. In most cases, this is the person or persons responsible for setting up the booths and wireless equipment, and monitoring the equipment throughout the entire conference. This person will coordinate with your venue's audio technician to ensure that the sound from the floor is brought to the interpreter booth(s) via an XLR cable. This is an absolutely essential step which must be done during set-up and testing of the equipment.

Keep in mind that in most cases, you will want to have the equipment delivered and set up at least one day in advance. Doing it on the same day as the event is not advisable unless you have 3-4 hours minimum prior to the event. It can take about 60 minutes per booth to set up, plus more time for the audio set-up and receiver distribution. If you intend to have large amounts of receivers handed out, you need to consider having someone hand out the receivers and collect them at the beginning and end of each day. Replacement costs for lost receivers add up quickly so this is another important step.

Do you feel like you're ready to start the process? We are experts at conference interpreting services and do hope that you will allow us to present a bid for your upcoming event. We guarantee to make your conference sound great in any language!

Questions? Call us on 800.695.8772