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You say tomato and he says pomodoro

Cetra translates everything from military manuals to corporate ads

GROWTH STRATEGIES



CURT HUDSON

Jiri Stejskal saw his Cetra translation company surge when he stopped using a geographic model.

ELKINS PARK — Some companies highlight their earnings, their big contract wins, their new products.

Cetra Inc.'s shining moment? The hanging death of a dictator.

The 10-year-old firm worked with the U.S. Department of Justice to transcribe and translate video recordings of Saddam Hussein's trial. It's just one of many gov-

BY ADAM STONE
SPECIAL TO THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

'The type of work we receive from them is **second to none**. The quality of the work is extremely high.'

Juan Rodriguez
project manager
U.S. Army

ernment jobs that have helped the Montgomery County company take its slice of the \$10 billion worldwide market for translation services.

With a master's degree and doctorate in Slavic languages and literatures from the University of Pennsylvania, founder and president Jiri Stejskal has attracted a 50/50 mix of corporate and government clients, with 400 contractors worldwide translating

CETRA: Company translates everything from Saddam's trial to corporate advertising

everything from military training manuals to corporate advertising.

It's a business of subtleties. Recently, for instance, a client balked at the rendering into Spanish of a distasteful word describing the back end of a duck.

It's a business of specialties, too. Cetra used to concentrate on Central and Eastern European languages. Stejskal changed course when he realized that expertise in the language of marketing would take his business further. Marketing after all is both ubiquitous and global.

UP CLOSE

COMPANY: Cetra Inc.

LOCATION: 7804 Montgomery Ave., Suites 8-10, Elkins Park, Pa. 19027

OWNER: Jiri Stejskal

TYPE OF COMPANY: Translation and interpretation services

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:

13 full time and 400 contract translators and interpreters

REVENUES:

2004 REVENUES: \$549,000

2005 REVENUES: \$896,000

2006 REVENUES: \$1.6 million

2007 PROJECTED REVENUES: \$2.2 million

LESSONS LEARNED: By broadening his specializations, Jiri Stejskal was able to tap a far broader client base.

"Business started booming when I dropped this [geographic] model and started specializing in this vertical," he said.

To switch specialties, Stejskal went all out. He joined marketing associations, took courses, began hiring people from within

the marketing world. "We were trying to really understand just what it is the clients do," he said.

That deep expertise is crucial in a business where clients typically have no idea what is going on. To succeed, "there has to be trust, the client has to believe that what we are delivering to them is a good product. After all, they don't speak the language," Stejskal said. "So the professional associations, those involvements, it shows them that we are serious about it, that we know what we are doing."

Juan Rodriguez believes it. As a project manager for the U.S. Army, he has engaged Cetra to translate coursework for military training. "The type of work we receive from them is second to none," Rodriguez said. "The quality of the work is extremely high. For the amount of work we send, which is a lot, we have barely ever returned anything for them to redo."

On the flip side of the coin, Cetra's freelance translators say the company's industry expertise helps them to get it right the first time.

"It's often hard to understand an industry that you are not involved in all the time, where they may have their own jargon or their own terminology," said Carlo Zuccharini of Wind Gap, Northampton County, who translates between English and Italian. "With other agencies you may be given a project and told, 'Well, get on with it,' and that's about it. [With Cetra], they provide a detailed briefing of projects."

That clarity is no coincidence. To deliver quality product, Cetra managers run through a detailed checklist on every job, in order to understand the clients' needs.

"For example, we want to know exactly who that target audience is," Stejskal said.

"We did a survey of users of iPods in Japan, and we automatically assumed the survey would go to teenagers, but it went to adults, and the client hadn't told us.

"In Japan it makes a big difference if you are speaking to young people or to adults, and it just didn't work. So we always want to know exactly who they are trying to reach."

While corporate clients can sometimes be vague, Cetra has found a new kind of clarity in the federal market, where it has been attracting military and other clients since 2001.

After getting listed on the General Services Administration schedule, which authorizes a firm to bid for government work, Cetra spent almost a year learning the ropes before landing its first government client, the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle.

While getting government work can take some effort, there are other business challenges that loom larger than merely writing bids. "We had to learn to write good proposals but more than that we had to learn to control our cash flow," Stejskal said.

In some cases it has taken five or six months to get paid on a big project. "That's when you go out and get your home equity loan to be able to pay the staff," Stejskal said, and he means it literally. These days he manages the cash by negotiating with his contractors to accept longer payment terms on government work, and by maintaining good vendor relationships and lines of credit.

It's worth the effort, he said, in a world where small corporate jobs pay \$500 and typical government contracts pay \$50,000 and up.

"The government doesn't pay very fast," Stejskal said, "but it always pays."

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