

The Fine Art of Saying No: Boundary Setting with Ann Marie Boulanger

Summary by Stephany Castillo

Many translators get stuck in their fear of saying “no” because they are afraid of creating conflict with clients and potentially losing work opportunities, both in the present and the future. However, if a translator continues to accept everything that comes their way, they may well run into frustration, anger, and burnout. All of these can lead to explosive behavior, which can sever the best of ties.

Three ways to assertively say “No”

The following suggestions are not meant to be rude. Rather, they are intended to help you set boundaries professionally. For example, if a client asks for a service that you do not want to do, you can tell them the truth, but spare the details. “I can’t help you with that,” gets the point across without a lengthy explanation.

Often clients will ask for a rush job due the same day or shortly thereafter. We professional translators don’t need to apologize or give explanations for why we can’t or won’t accept a job. Clients aren’t interested in hearing explanations and if we do apologize, it opens the door for them to ask when we can get the job done, which lengthens the conversation. “I don’t have time in my schedule for that” establishes time boundaries professionally.

Sometimes a client will not take “no” for an answer. In such a case we need to reinforce our boundaries. Restating boundaries with phrases like “I have a conflict,” or “I have no short-term availability” effectively quash the conversation.

Areas where boundaries are needed

The work hours when you are available to your clients and deadlines are areas where you can set boundaries concerning your time. Setting your business hours and making sure your clients know them allows you to reinforce that you do not work 24/7, even if you do work from home. You can do this by including the hours you work in your email signature, and in automatic reply emails you can set up for your clients to receive. Not replying to emails or calls outside of work hours, turning off email notifications, and having a separate business number are ways to reinforce boundaries.

When a client has set an unreasonable deadline for a job, make the framework of your response about you, which puts responsibility on your client to respect you and makes it harder for them to argue. Try using these phrases: “I only work [specified hours]. To maintain my work balance, I don’t work on [specified time]” or “In order to continue delivering the high-quality work you’ve come to expect, I’ve determined my capacity is XYZ words/day.”

For beginner translators it may be harder to decline types of work they don’t enjoy or feel comfortable doing, for example, translations outside your specialization or Machine Translation Post Editing (MTPE). Phrases like, “XYZ is not a service I offer,” or “That’s not something I’m qualified to do” allow you to decline politely, and you can always follow up with “But here’s a short list of excellent translators who might be able to help” and refer colleagues.

Clients may want low rates, degressive rates, or low MTPE. “Unfortunately, that rate is not sustainable for me,” “I can’t do it for that rate, but here’s what I propose,” or “The MT output needs

retranslating.so my full rate would apply” are phrases that can help. “I will have to work weekends/evenings, so my rush rate of X will apply,” and “My minimum rate of X applies for requests under X words/ X hours” may also be useful. “This covers my admin costs for project management and invoicing” can help enforce rush and minimum rates. Any work that requires converting formats or extracting text to translate, extra revisions or extra work should also be charged at a premium rate. In addition, it is important to set clear deadlines and expectations for payment terms whether it is upon the receipt of the invoice, net 30 days, or in advance.

Having business LinkedIn and Facebook profiles are ways to keep unsolicited communication at bay. Thanking a client for an invitation and clarifying communication boundaries is an excellent framework to deal with situations that may arise.

Ultimately, if a client persistently disrespects you and/or your boundaries, it may be best to sever ties to make room for better clients.

This is a summary of a presentation given by Ann Marie Boulanger, C.Tr., MA. at the 2023 NETA Conference. You can read more about her work at <https://www.liontranslationacademy.com/>