


SETTING the TABLE

FOR

CHANGE:




WHY EFFECTIVE
TRANSLATION



IS LIKE THROWING
A MEMORABLE
DINNER PARTY

ILLUME

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As utilities and program administrators set the table for greater inclusion in their programs, how they invite participants into their programs matters as much, if not more, than what they offer them when they arrive. For would-be participants who speak languages other than English, translation is central to a gracious and welcoming invitation. Yet most of the time, our efforts at translation fall short.

In the US, those of us who speak English as a first language rarely experience the frustration of navigating the world in a non-native language. And yet we ask many would-be participants to do just that: navigate access to our offerings in a language that is not their own. The result? We make valuable customers feel like unwelcome guests and undermine the goals and best intentions of our programs.

Using the metaphor of a dinner party, we explore the experiences of constituents who speak a language other than English.

It is like getting invited to a dinner party where you do not feel welcome; the conversation is stilted and awkward, and you find yourself bolting for the door at the first opportunity you get. So how do we ensure our translations are welcoming?

Setting the Table for Change

Crafting the Perfect Invitation Requires Careful Communication and Attention to Social Expectations.

Just like it takes attention to detail and polish to design the perfect party invitation, growing your reach into diverse communities begins with effective and meticulous translation. Translation is not a straightforward swap of words from one language to another. What might be a neutral suggestion in one language or to one community can read as offensive or intrusive to another. Creating communication and outreach that resonates with the communities you are trying to reach requires attending to everyday language as it is used in context.

A Warm Welcome Begins with Directions and a Tour.

Just because you live in a welcoming home, does not mean you can assume that your party guests know your address, let alone how to navigate their way around your kitchen. The same extends to utility websites. In a recent benchmarking review of utility websites, the ILLUME team found that those with Google-translated pages often lacked translations for graphics, videos, or other explanatory materials on the website. Not only did this make it more complicated to access the materials and information, non-English speakers had an inferior viewing experience, effectively underscoring a linguistic hierarchy that put English on top.

A Great Theme Ties Everything Together.

It is all about the experience. When providing program or service materials in another language, consider the entire customer experience and offer in-language support from beginning to end. For example, a weatherization program that has an initial sign-up in Spanish but requires participants to provide their own translators for the in-home audit is not, in fact, an equivalent or equitable offering for both English and Spanish speakers. Utilities working to create programming for their non-English speaking customers must consider the whole experience.



“The Invite”

“Receiving a poorly **translated invitation** must feel like getting a **last-minute invite** to a dinner party. You ask yourself, “**do they really want me to attend?**” In this sense, the poor translation makes the entire offer feel like an **afterthought** at best, or **disingenuous** at worst.



“Where to Sit”

We’ve all been there. You arrive at a dinner party as the **newbie**. Everyone is mingling, but **no one is speaking to you**. The **host is not around** or **too busy to engage**. In the end, you feel a little isolated and **left to your own devices**. You ask yourself, “**should I be here?**” and “**Do I want to be here?**”



“Dinner is Served”

It usually gets worse from there. When dinner is served **you’re stuck**. Odds are you could be sitting next to someone **not eager to engage**, and when the food is passed there are many items on the menu that are **unfamiliar**. Like everyone these days, there are foods you’re trying to avoid. You ask yourself, “**what is best for me?**” but don’t know how to politely inquire. So instead, you eat what you’re given and wonder if **you’ll regret it later**.