

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

Being the Only B

By Terena Bell

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Summer 2011

Copyright © 2011 by Leland Stanford Jr. University
All Rights Reserved

Being the Only B

The owner of the only certified B Corporation in Kentucky assesses the pros and cons of the certification **BY TERENA BELL**

BEING THE ONLY ONE of something—whatever that something is—generally has one of two results. Either it makes you hot stuff or it backfires. In business, you hope for the first. It's supply and demand at its finest: Less of you increases the desire for you. But move away from theory and into practice, and real life may not always work that way. Sometimes being the only one of something means that fewer people understand you or realize what you truly have to offer. Instead of becoming rare, you become an anomaly—the product people aren't quite sure what to do with, an outcast.

I am the owner of In Every Language, Kentucky's only certified B Corporation. Not only are we the only B in Kentucky, which means we've been certified as a socially responsible business, we're the only B in our industry. So if anybody understands what it's like to be the only one of something in business, it's me.

Even before certification, In Every Language was a social enterprise. Based in Louisville, Ky., In Every Language provides translating, interpreting, and other language services to clients around the world. That's the business part of what we do. When it comes to the social part, we do two different things.

First, the community nature of translation is inherent. Translators take what one person says and translate it into another language, so another person can understand. Without translators, information wouldn't pass correctly between cultures and countries, international misunderstandings would develop, and wars could start. The American Translators Association claims that it takes less time to train a fighter pilot than it takes to train an Arabic interpreter, and the interpreter is more important to national security.

Less frighteningly, community interpreters help patients better understand their course of care and help immigrants obtain access to community services. Both translators and interpreters provide access to information and knowledge that the language barrier blocked before. Being a translator automatically means being a helper. The sheer fact that In Every Language is a translation provider automatically integrates social cause into our business because, regardless of the message translated, social benefit lies in the act of translating itself.

For me, though, this wasn't enough. Although the translation industry is replete with social benefit, not every translation com-

TERENA BELL is CEO of In Every Language, a certified B Corporation located in Louisville, Ky. Her work with the company has been recognized by two Kentucky governors, and she has both spoken and published internationally on translation industry topics.



pany is a social enterprise. In Every Language is the industry's only certified B Corporation for a reason: We do translation differently.

TACKLING TWO GLOBAL PROBLEMS AT ONCE

When I started the company in 2005, I wanted a full-time job that mattered. I was already freelancing as an interpreter at Kentucky Refugee Ministries, working with Louisville's Francophone African population. Interpreting gave me a life. Any other job I took seemed fruitless, without soul. It was only when I was interpreting that I felt fully alive, as if I were using a gift from God to benefit others. While interpreting, I disappeared and became a catalyst for change. The tremendous help that translating and interpreting affords others is why I opened In Every Language. I realized not only that refugees and immigrants need interpreters, but that there is also an abundance of bilingual, trained professionals who need jobs.

Enter Translation Plus Two, In Every Language's unique approach to translation and the second part of our social mission.

Our company slogan is Translating Words, Transforming Lives, because we're trying to help solve two global problems at once: the language barrier and world poverty.

In addition to providing translation services, we contract 100 percent of our translators from socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, such as refugees, people from undeveloped or underdeveloped countries, and women from cultures where they are not allowed to work outside the home. We also help these contractors become certified translators and grow their own translation microbusinesses.

I had hoped that fighting poverty and the language barrier would be a bandwagon everyone would want to get on, but not in Kentucky—or at least not at first. Immediately after we opened the company, some people at Kentucky nonprofits turned against In Every Language. The director of one resettlement agency accused me of trying to take advantage of “poor refugees” for personal gain. This hurt. How could offering professional work to someone who needs and deserves it be considered taking advantage?

It didn't take long to understand what she meant. She didn't really think I was taking advantage of refugees; she thought I was profiting from them. In Every Language is the first for-profit language service provider to contract members of Kentucky's refugee population. I am not Kentucky's first social entrepreneur, but I was definitely the first one she had ever met.

Since then, In Every Language has had to prove itself repeatedly. We turn six in August 2011, and I still find myself explaining social entrepreneurship and why it's important. Ironically, social entrepreneurship is a fundamental part of Kentucky culture, as our state's history is agrarian and community-based. But Kentuckians have never called their efforts social enterprises, and even though community farms may be the most elemental type of social enterprise there is, most small farmers don't think of themselves as businessmen. To them, businessmen are J.R. Ewing—ruthless and in suits—not everyday working people. The people who lead organized social enterprise movements unfortunately have done little to dispel this stereotype. Their marketing and certification efforts have focused on the coasts, with B Lab in particular certifying 108 B Corps in California compared to one each in Iowa, Kansas, Idaho, and Kentucky.

Fortunately, the hostility in Louisville's nonprofit community has gone away, and Kentucky's refugee resettlement agencies and other community organizations have come to see In Every Language as a partner. We team up to interpret mayoral debates and work together on making interpreter training more accessible to those considering translating or interpreting as a career.

B Corporation certification helped resolve some of these public relations problems. In particular, the status has helped differentiate us from for-profits that focus solely on their bottom line. Our actions have earned us respect, but being a B has earned us understanding. We describe it to people like this: B Corp is a national movement, but the commonwealth of Kentucky has yet to recognize it as a legal filing status, so we're filed as an LLC for now. We're allowed to keep our money, but legally we're bound to a mission just like nonprofits.

THE CSR DISCONNECT

Even though In Every Language helps the economically disadvantaged, we like to sell to those a bit better off: the Fortune Global

500. After all, for a for-profit business to be sustainable, it has to make money. We earn revenues by selling translation and interpreting. Although many smaller businesses or local nonprofits may need those services, it's big business that's able to pay for them. So we market ourselves to the Johnson & Johnsons of the world, who are not located in Kentucky.

You would think that being a social enterprise would give us a competitive edge with this market. Unfortunately, when those responsible for purchasing translation hear “social enterprise,” many think “nonprofit.” When they think “nonprofit,” they think “unprofessional” or “no good.” In the world of professional language services, quality is king. One mistranslated word in factory instructions and workers could chop off their hands. A misinterpreted phrase in a doctor's appointment could lead to death. Our work is important and we must do it well. Say “refugee,” “impoverished,” or “discriminated population” loud enough and some potential clients question quality. In fact, one even said: “You need to drop this B Corp thing. No one understands what it is and it makes you look like amateurs.”

When we first became a B, I thought the certification would help. The big plan was to sell our services to socially responsible corporations through their CSR departments. But at many businesses, there's a disconnect between those responsible for CSR and those contracting for translation services. The CSR officers I meet love our model, but most have no idea who at their company is in charge of translation. Even when they do, the actual translation buyer must still be swayed. It takes considerable work to convince buyers that our translators are of the utmost quality. In fact, because of the stigma that arises from their backgrounds, I'd say they're better than translators at other companies where quality isn't immediately questioned. Our translators are highly experienced, degreed, and certified. When we come across less qualified translators, we refer them to competitors whose quality standards are less strict. This way, they can gain the experience needed to work with our clients. In the end, our quality procedures must be stricter because of the stigma against our translators' backgrounds. Still, being the industry's only B has hurt us.

We have a solution, though: We're banking on people caring. Maybe Translation Plus Two isn't the right fit for every customer, but not every customer is the right fit for us. Again, we're looking for people who care. We're looking for customers who get excited by the fact that a Somali woman can grow her translation business while still respecting her husband's wish that she not work outside her home. We're looking for customers who love that their Bosnian interpreter has a success story, that he first learned how to interpret professionally while working in the camps for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. These are the clients we want to work for. These are the people whose materials we're proud to translate.

We're not perfect. No person or company is. But In Every Language has a strong mission and a clear sense of its corporate and social identity. Our staff is determined. We'd rather be the only B than not be a B at all. Because being a B means that you as a customer have proof that our mission is not just self-serving. We want to be held accountable. ■