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## With Net, Italian Translation Company Reshapes Itself for the Information Age

By BRUNO GIUSSANI [BIO](#)

### E U R O B Y T E S



**M**ODENA, ITALY -- "Your customers are your best teachers; just listen to them," said Rodrigo Vergara.

He did, and the first lesson he learned is that the Internet is changing the way we work.

"Three years ago I didn't have a clue what the Internet was all about," admitted Vergara, the executive director of [Logos](#), an Italian translation company. "But our customers -- among them Sun Microsystems -- kept asking us to set up facilities so that they could send their texts electronically over the wire for our translators."

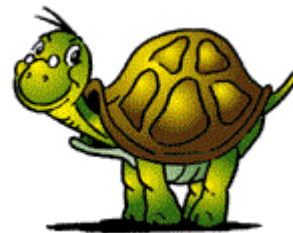
Vergara didn't just buy a modem. He studied the business implications of the Internet and in 1995 he started to redesign the whole work procedures at Logos. Today 1,200 translators scattered around the world, from Russia and New Zealand to a remote alpine village in Northern Italy, work for his company almost exclusively through the Internet and handle over 200 translations a day.

They are coached by a staff of 150 based in Modena who represent the core of this "distributed corporation," as Vergara calls it.

"We receive the original texts by e-mail, distribute them to our specialists, get the translated copies back, check them and send

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### SEARCH THE LOGOS DICTIONARY



Find a translation for:




**Note:** When you click the search button, a new window will open and you will be connected to the Logos web server. The New York Times has no control over the content or availability of the Logos server. When you have finished viewing the search results, you can return to this article by closing the search window. If your browser does not open a new window, use the "back" button to return to this page.

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the final version to the customer, all through the Internet, invoices included," Vergara explained enthusiastically.

The typical case might involve a technical manual for the multilingual European market sent to Logos from, say, Texas Instruments's headquarters in Dallas. "We handle it in 10 languages with our people in France, in Germany or in Sweden," he said. "They can also communicate by e-mail to help each other with the correct interpretation of a paragraph or in order to adjust it to specific national parameters."

Computer skills and Internet literacy are now basic requirements to be hired by Logos.

The second lesson Vergara learned is that in the information business, you're better off giving out basic services free.

Last year, in an unprecedented move, Logos made its word dictionary available on the World Wide Web. The database currently has over 5 million entries in 31 different languages and increases by approximately 500 new terms a day. It can be accessed free of charge.

"The online dictionary is a key resource for our translators and in a way it is our collective memory," Vergara explained in an interview last week.

A Chilean with an agricultural engineering background, Vergara, now 45, came to Italy as a refugee when the military took power in Santiago in 1973.

"When we started Logos in 1979 we were just a handful of employees working in the same room," he said. They found their first clients among the hundreds of craftsmen and small manufacturers of the Modena region. "We translated their commercial letters and when one of us had a problem he just asked out loud and someone else in the room would help him," Vergara recalled.

The company's growth was accompanied by continuous investments in technology, "but we couldn't really find a way to effectively share our cumulative knowledge with our people at the other end of the world -- until the Internet," he said.

Actually, each professional translator delivers two products: the copy, and a specific glossary of terms and sentences created along with the translation. The 150,000 such glossaries built over the years have become the main source for the terminological database.

The user can access the Logos home page and enter a word or a combination of words, and in seconds receive in return their

equivalent (plus definition, form of speech, gender, context and literary quotes) in several languages -- up to 31 right now, but Logos has plans to include 110 more.

"Since the original structure of the dictionary relied mostly on our glossaries, not all words are translated into each of the featured languages," Vergara explained.

English and Italian are the most extended sections. But the dictionary includes widely used languages like Arabic, Russian, German and French as well as local dialects such as Valencian (spoken in Valencia, Spain) and even the artificial Esperanto and no-longer-used Latin.

Vergara's third lesson: cooperate with your customers. Let them add value to your business -- they'll do it because at the same time they add value to the product they will get value.

While originally the dictionary was updated by Logos's translators in the course of their work, input comes now also from visitors to the Web site. "Users are invited to add missing terms, or terms for missing languages via a dialogue box," Vergara explained.

And if customers are not happy with the given translation or would like to suggest an alternative, "we'll be happy to consider their proposal," he added. "Languages are a matter of opinion and context; if you don't agree, just drop us your version."

Vergara turned to his computer and typed "See you then;" the machine returned "Ci vediamo allora" as the Italian translation. "You may not find this adequate to the paragraph you're writing, or it can occur that your regional language patterns exclude the word "allora" ("then") and prefer the use of the day or the date, like in "See you on Tuesday" for example," he explained.

When someone adds an entry, he is required to give a name and an e-mail address. This information is recorded and two question marks are inserted against the entry in the dictionary -- where they remain until the word is checked and validated by Logos's terminologists.

Another feature of this living dictionary is the Word Exchange Forum, which is much like a bulletin board for suggested translations. "This is the place where our translators and the public can post terminology queries and ask for help," Vergara explained. "We won't translate a full text for free, of course, but if you can't find a word or, say, need to know a proverb in another language, you can ask for assistance in our forum and our translators -- or other Web users -- will try to help you."

An average 50 queries a day are posted on the forum. If the user has entered his e-mail address, he will receive an alert directly in

his mailbox when a proposed translation is posted.

Over the last few months, Vergara's team has kept adding new features to the Web site. Each word in the dictionary is automatically linked to the WebCrawler search engine, and clicking on it will result in a search for relevant information throughout the entire Web.

A blue light bulb icon displayed next to the term will activate a selected link. I searched "biella" ("connecting rod" in Italian) and after clicking on the light bulb I was taken to a drawing posted on a Ford Motor Company Web site. "We're turning the dictionary into an encyclopedia, by using the Internet resources," Vergara said.

Yellow light bulbs represent hyperlinks to topic-related glossaries. I looked for "photo" and the yellow icon opened up a glossary of terms used in photography and design, plus a field-specific English-Italian dictionary.

A book icon indicates a gateway to Logos's "Wordtheque," a fast-growing collection of 2,000 books and other documents in full text that can help to set a word in context. "It is very difficult to give a perfectly clear and complete definition of a term, but reading a few quotes may help you understand its meaning," Vergara said.

Soon users will find a new category of icons next to the translated terms: loudspeakers. By clicking on them they will be able to hear an audio file of the word spoken by a native.

The database, built on Netscape and Oracle software, cost Logos about \$1 million to create. So why is the company giving it out free?

"We were doing it anyway for our translators, so it didn't cost us a lot more to open it up to Web users," he said.

The obvious pay-off: "The site is being used in schools, by professionals and even by competitors: this gives us a very high profile -- and attracts new customers world-wide."

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- [Logos](#)

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