I'm a sucker for self improvement and in years past have adorned my bookshelves with significant works on cooking, travelling, how to chat up girls (okay, it was a long time ago) and motor maintenance. Later I moved on to the business books - they had catchy titles like Chicken Soup for the Business Noodle - that seemed to promise success, if only you could get up and find your socks.

AIIC members have also looked to the Private Market Sector for self improvement. There was a time in AIIC's halcyon days when I was a member of the standing committee and we saw salvation as lying in large charts showing the manning strength for interpreting teams. Nothing was left to chance and the earnest enquirer could discover the secrets of covering Icelandic and Greek in a small Czech town. We used to relax by joshing the jet-lagged Doron Horowitz. They were happy days.

It was therefore with a sense of anticipation that I attended the Private Market Sector meeting in Paris in mid-July. I looked forward to meeting up with some old friends and thought it would all be something of a trip down memory lane. As you probably know this sector brings together interpreters who work outside the big international organisations for all sorts of companies, associations and professional bodies. We see ourselves in romantic terms: keepers of the pioneering spirit, rugged riders of the high plains, waders of foaming rivers and masters of the past subjunctive. We respect those who work for big organisations but - mums the word - see them as just a little risk averse.

In the spirit of self-improvement that pervades all our vibrant Association does, here is some audience participation.

AIIC test question 1: this is now called the Private Market Sector but it used to be called:

- Non-Agreement Sector
- Argumentative Sector
- Slanging Match
- Upper Volta

AIIC test question 2: did you notice the name change? (Be honest.)

- Yes
- No
- First I've heard of it
- A gin and tonic please

This summer's meeting saw the launch of the market survey carried out on the French interpreting market by outside consultants. Yes, consultants! I could barely contain my excitement. I'd had a sneak preview - called a heads-up on the low down - and fully expected a bright yet uncomfortable
light to be shone on some of our cherished ideals. You certainly want to be there when there are sacred bubbles to be burst. Or ditto cows stampeded.

The findings of this detailed survey are sobering but not entirely surprising to us rugged souls in the private sector. The market is now dominated by agencies and our clients now want to be able to deal with company structure rather than an interpreter with access to a phone. This involves an office, a coffee machine and a vacuous girl polishing her nails. I may be able to sort this out at home but will have to persuade a daughter. Probably with money.

There is no doubt that the way we do business has changed. In the old days we used to get a phone call from the association of cheese makers and then work at their meeting. No longer. Nowadays the cheese makers call in a professional conference organiser. The organiser then talks to a venue, say a conference centre or a hotel. The hotel contracts people to cover the technical services, which may be company that has no technical equipment itself but knows how to "source" it. They in turn contact other companies who provide them with sound equipment, overhead projectors, loud speakers, ventilators, computer leads and - finally - interpreting equipment. With luck someone will remember that the booths need interpreters. This means that we are now a long way from our friendly cheese makers. Not only that but a phone call and a confirmatory letter are clearly no substitute for a 25 page contract in which you swear that you have an active non-discrimination policy and have never been convicted of arson.

The meeting made it all so clear that I rushed home itching to create order and grow (yes, it's now a verb) my business. Understanding languages and being articulate no longer cuts the mustard. We all need a business plan to get with the programme. Here is mine:

- Tidy the office
- Stop calling it the office. It's now a think-space
- Clear away papers. This may involve pushing some envelopes
- Print new business cards, this time in 3D with a hologram
- Have a haircut and lose the beer gut
- Update my Christmas/New Year card list
- Move the cat
- Remove old coffee cups
- Rename the goldfish "Drive" and "Ambition" and hope that Jaws and Fluffy will forgive me
- Remove old pieces of toast (not mine)

Today I marched with tungsten-tipped purpose into the study/office/junk room and got rid of the cat. She's a friendly old thing, but does tend to leave lots of hair on the chair. This means I have to sit daintily, trying not to place too much weight otherwise the hair will stick to me, and that would detract from the thrusting profile I seek.

I managed to shift the cat and then realised that before I could get commercially aggressive I had to fill in a form so my favourite international organisation could pay me. This involved assembling tickets, e-tickets, e-ticket receipts, train tickets, hotel bills, boarding passes, birth certificate and vaccination certificate. Said organisation saw me recently within their hallowed halls, yet seem curiously reluctant to admit that I was ever there. It renews my faith in chaos theory.

As I've been away promoting gaiety between nations there is a lot of post asking me to sign up for new credit cards or replace all the windows in the house. It takes time to wade through it all. It all stands in the way of the new fired-up me. "Furred up, more like" opine the beloved children; and I thought the little tykes had all left home.

I think it is fair to call the new commercial me a work in progress. No doubt this autumn will bring new challenges and triumphs to Smith plc, and if you care to buy me a drink when we work together
I'll give you a frank and full disclosure. In the meantime you should consider the next Private Market Sector meeting which will take place next January in Barcelona, which has one of the world's leading business schools and where we will be taken through our marketing paces by a specialist. We will deal with important issues like "flirting with secretaries" and "should I offshore my fax machine". It'll be a blast.

Fins aviat.

Phil Smith is a UK-based freelance who finds the world ever more confusing. This is strange because he knew everything at the age of 20.

Recommended citation format: