

By Sarah A. Klein

Bilingual operators are standing by

As Hispanic population grows, so do requests for Spanish speakers

When the phone rings at Pronto Connections Inc., a call center in River North, employees must be prepared to answer some tricky questions.

The queries, generated by customers of Pronto clients Turtle Wax Inc., Sinai Health System, Publications International Ltd. and about 200 others, can be as obscure as how to replace the battery in an electronic "Hello, Elmo" book (Publications International) or as general as how to find a gynecologist (Sinai Health System).

And language definitely matters to these consumers. Twenty percent of callers, or 600,000 a year, want their information in Spanish. Pronto is happy to accommodate them, but charges clients a 10% premium because the calls tend to run longer.

"There's a lot of personal conversation," says Diana Cervantes, a senior account executive with Pronto. "It's considered respectful."



Michele Ringwood, president of Pronto Connections Inc., a River North call center, has been offering customers the option of talking to a Spanish-speaking customer service representative since 1988. Photo: John R. Boehm

The concerns of Spanish-speaking callers are quite different from those of English speakers, as well, Ms. Cervantes says. Spanish speakers generally tend not to complain, so instead of registering a problem, as their English-speaking counterparts do, they might call for a sales pitch. That's especially true of new immigrants who are unfamiliar with products and payment practices. It's not uncommon for someone who has recently arrived in the United States to call and say, "This product looks interesting. Tell me more about it," Ms. Cervantes says.

But even Spanish-speaking callers who have lived in the country for years will spend more time on the phone, building a relationship with the operator before proceeding to their questions, she says.

"Relationships are so important that Hispanics take time to cultivate and sustain those relationships," agrees Luis Larrea, professor of multicultural marketing at DePaul University's Kellstadt Graduate School of Business. "It takes precedence over anything else."

It may take longer to convert those relationships into sales, but the effort is worth it, says Ms. Cervantes, a 12-year veteran of Pronto. If convinced of the merits of a product, Spanish-speaking callers will convey the information to others. "They'll refer other family members. We've gotten calls from relatives the next day," she says.

Having a bilingual service is a tricky business, says Pronto's president, Michele Ringwood, who founded the company in 1981 and has been providing bilingual assistance since 1988, when clients in the medical field began asking for it.

Fortunately, the Spanish-speaking labor pool needed to execute such a program is vast in Chicago. The city's Hispanic population is a mirror of the Hispanic population in the United States as a whole, composed of the same percentage of people of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican and Spanish heritage, making recruiting easier.

Ms. Ringwood won't disclose the revenue of her privately held company, but says the call center's business has grown by 20% every year for the last seven. She attributes the growth in part to more individualized marketing approaches by consumer product companies.

Even with their new emphasis on attracting Hispanics, however, companies continue to make mistakes in trying to tap the market, she says. Many use Spanish to draw in Hispanic customers, but then switch to English for customer service or documentation requests.

"If you don't keep the communication going in-language, the conversion rate is worse than if you did the whole campaign in English" Ms. Ringwood says. "That's the biggest mistake I see."

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