

Process Improvement – Steps to Moving your US Hispanic Customer Service to the Next Level

By Tony Malaghan CEO, Arial International

So you're a company servicing a small number of US Hispanic customers, but now you're ready to take your business approach and customer care to the next level for the US Hispanic segment of the market. Companies servicing a small number of Spanish-speaking customers often feel that both company and customer needs can be adequately met using in-house bilingual talent or a vendor providing three-way telephone interpretative services to handle the small number of inbound calls. There are a variety of verbal interpretive services which function along the lines of an intermediary between the company and the customer, e.g. when a non-English-speaking customer calls your contact center and is then connected to a third party interpreter. The interpreter acts as a go-between relaying the conversation between the non-English speaking customer and the contact center agent. While this process may be adequate for a company servicing a very limited number of Spanish-speaking customers, there are obvious issues with call duration, potential for misunderstanding, confusion with technical terms and concepts in the translation process and perceived customer service issues. When your US Hispanic customer base increases most companies put forth initiatives to implement a more robust bilingual Hispanic customer care strategy.

Prior to discussing what's required to build a best in class bilingual US Hispanic customer care program, I would like to give the US Hispanic market some perspective in terms of size and importance:

1. The Hispanic population of the United States reached nearly 58 million in 2016, making people of Hispanic origin the nation's largest ethnic or racial minority. Hispanics constituted 18 percent of the nation's total population (*U.S. Census Bureau*).
2. The projected Hispanic population of the United States in 2060 is 119 million. According to this projection, the Hispanic population will constitute 29 percent of the nation's population by that date (*U.S. Census Bureau*).
3. Ranking of the size of the U.S. Hispanic population worldwide, as of 2016. Only Mexico (121 million) had a larger Spanish speaking population than the United States (58 million).
4. 40 million is the number of U.S. residents age 5 and older who spoke Spanish at home in 2016. This is a 133.4 percent increase since 1990 when it was 17.3 million (*U.S. Census Bureau*).
5. According to a Nielsen's Report "Hispanic Influence Reaches new Heights in the US", In 2015, Hispanics controlled \$1.3 trillion in buying power, an amount larger than the GDP of Australia or Spain, according the Selig Center for Economic Growth, up 167% since the turn of the century. The increase is more than twice the 76% growth in non-Hispanic

buying power during the same period. The center's projections show U.S. Hispanic buying power continuing this trend, reaching \$1.7 trillion by 2020.

Based on the above data, and there is plenty more information to support how attractive this segment of the market is, I think we can correctly assume that if you are not proactively targeting these customers, it is a segment of the US market worth looking into.

There are many white papers and articles available on the Internet that talk about how to approach the US Hispanic market from a business and marketing approach. What is lacking, is information on how the back office needs to be prepared to handle the customer interactions once marketing begins. The very best marketing strategy can fail on execution if the back office is not structured to handle customer inquiries, sales, fulfilment and collections from launch. Companies who are successful in servicing US Hispanics use the following business approach:

- 1. Assess language skills of bilingual employees:** It never ceases to amaze me how scripted English language customer interaction is, yet management has little idea what the Spanish-speaking representative is actually saying to your customer. More often than not, bilingual agents use casual, colloquial Spanish as opposed to a professional tone, as this is the kind of Spanish they speak at home. To deliver a consistent message across your English and Spanish customer base, it is recommended that you test the Spanish and English proficiency of your bilingual agents to evaluate the verbal communication, comprehension, and writing skills of both employees and job candidates. Undertaking this process will allow you to assign employees to the business process that they are most qualified to execute. We recommend testing both the proficiency of both languages of your bilingual agents so that they are qualified to handle both Spanish and English language calls. A language assessment also provides a benchmark for establishing a certification program for bilingual employees in order to justify paying bilingual premiums.
- 2. Bilingual Training:** Most bilingual employees do not receive in-language, industry-specific training. You would be surprised to hear how many bilingual representatives in the US are trained in English and then instructed by their companies to "now go say that in Spanish." Many bilingual employees' understanding of Spanish is often limited to day-to-day activities which require very different communication skills and terminology than a business conversation. Companies must instruct their bilingual team how to use accurate, consistent vocabulary in the correct context for their industry in English and Spanish. Include specific vocabulary, technical jargon and phrases used in your industry. An often overlooked but critical aspect of bilingual training is teaching your employees how to understand and effectively handle the cultural diversity of Spanish speakers in the USA.

- 3. Consistency in Communication:** A challenging issue for companies servicing US Hispanic customers is communicating in neutral Business Spanish to all of its customers. Your employees and customers may come from different backgrounds and, therefore, communicate differently both in written and spoken Spanish. Speak to customers in a consistent voice, using similar terminology and phrasing to describe processes and products.

Ensure that all communication with customers, both written and verbal, by telephone and/or automated systems, is in Spanish. All translations should use appropriate, neutral Business Spanish, formal and grammatically correct, that is clearly understandable by any Spanish speaker.

- 4. Call Monitoring in Spanish:** One of the challenges often faced by companies is that many supervisors and managers do not speak or understand Spanish and, therefore, are unable to monitor calls. Therefore compliance and quality are at risk and management does not know how agents perform on the phone. An independent third party who monitors Spanish language calls and provides specific feedback to managers is a simple solution to this problem.
- 5. Translations of written documentation, scripts, recorded announcements, etc.:** Use an audit procedure to check the translation against the original to ensure accuracy and that the translation retains its original tone and meaning. To be certain the translation is pure, use a combination of native Spanish and native English speakers. The impact of written communication has wide and long-term consequences as compared to telephone or other verbal communication.
- 6. Choosing Outsourcing and Vendors:** Utilize the services of Hispanic market experts. Select partners who are bilingual and bicultural and are familiar with your industry and who understand your company's processes, terminology, and how you do business. Companies specializing in the US Hispanic market can be an invaluable resource in helping you to "get it right the first time" and have a wealth of knowledge about what has been attempted in the past and not worked.

In summary, there is no doubt that there is a large and potentially lucrative market opportunity for those companies prepared to invest in developing a US Hispanic market strategy. The smart companies are the ones that not only focus on the marketing, but invest up front in developing a bilingual customer service infrastructure to support the marketing from launch. Knowing how your bilingual agents are interacting with your customers and providing them with the tools to do the job is no more than you would do for your English-speaking agents, so don't sell your Spanish-speaking agents short and risk success in this market.

Tony Malaghan is CEO of Arial International, a multicultural, multilingual consulting, training and services firm. Our domestic and international clients count on our expertise in the U.S. Hispanic Market and throughout Latin America. Via language proficiency assessments, translations and bilingual training we evaluate and improve the Spanish and English verbal and written business communication skills in the collection industry.

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