

# BUSINESS HORIZONS

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## TECHNOLOGY, CULTURE & COMMUNICATION

### ***PART I: USING INTERACTIVE VOICE MAIL FOR LATINO AUDIENCES***

*By Cynthia Brink with Eduardo Retta*

Whether we like it or not, interactive voice systems are now a necessity for U.S. businesses. A recorded voice giving a selection of choices on the other end of the line has become as much a part of U.S. business as traffic, e-mail or quick lunches.

The objective of interactive voice response in the U.S. is simple: To service customers, cheaply. Businesses now must survive competition by keeping costs low while connecting with customers and resonating with their needs. Since "every caller is a potential customer," voice mail provides a consistent response. The bottom line? Automated interactive voice systems work efficiently in managing communication without adding new hires.

It seems logical that as companies expand into Spanish-speaking markets, we should all be able to simply translate and implement our existing voice response systems. Not true! An interactive voice system that connects you with English speakers in the most effective ways can have the **opposite** effect with Latinos. This is because at the most fundamental cultural levels, U.S. Anglos and Latinos respond to - and are motivated by - very different things.

If you decide to translate your voice response system into Spanish, it is obviously assumed that your target market is Spanish (language) dominant. Among Spanish-dominant

#### ***TRUE STORIES***

Our firm validated a translation for an interactive, customer service telephone survey for BellSouth's use in Brazil. It was typical telemarketing, with prompts, instructions and sub-directories. We cautioned that it would not go over very well in Brazil. Although the translation was excellent, within days of implementation, the project was cancelled due to poor response.

-Eduardo Retta

populations, regardless of geographic location, one fact remains: Spanish-dominant people *feel* more Latin than American. They will respond to Latin business protocols and styles long before they will connect with the speed and individualism of the U.S. market.

If you can incorporate this kind of cultural knowledge into the way you use technology, your effectiveness with Latino markets will increase exponentially.

Why are most interactive voice response systems ineffective when translated into Spanish?

**Latinos are relational in nature.** Human connection is vital to business and personal relationships. A handshake, a smile, *el abrazo* and human interaction are essential drivers and motivators. The majority of Latinos see voice response systems and surveys as cold and impersonal, and designed only to get their money, or obtain private information about them or their families. Case studies indicate that U.S. style direct mail and catalog sales fail throughout Latin America. It is principally the impersonal nature of these methods that makes them ineffective.

**Latinos don't "give it all away".** U.S. culture values openness and transparency from individuals. There is an assumption in this country that our credit card, bank account, or medical information is safe, more or less, and if someone with access to our personal data abuses that access, they will be found and prosecuted. Latinos are generally cautious, conservative and private with business transactions. Private information is given only to relatives or to trusted individuals or entities. To the Latino, trust is everything.

**Latinos are status-conscious.** Receiving equal treatment to everyone else minimizes status and reduces incentive to return for more. U.S. culture encourages and values equal treatment for all. Cultural consultant Ron Snell put it best when he called **the line** “the great equalizer”. In the U.S., we expect to go to the grocery store or bank and wait in line. It is only right and fair that we all take our turn. Waiting in line is part of the American way. It is engrained into the way we think and move and breathe.

In sharp contrast, noted cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall writes

be answered in the order it was received.” The interpretation is “you are not very important.”

To Latinos, having status means having people around you; following, supporting, serving you, personally. In the U.S. most of us believe we should make our own telephone calls. However, when a principal from our office calls Latin America, we always have the call placed by another member of our team. Our associate will phone the Latin executive’s office and announce the phone call to the executive’s secretary; i.e. “This is Sr. Retta’s office from Dallas, calling for Sr. Villarreal.” Then, Mr. Villarreal’s

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**Part 2 of Technology, Culture and Communication will address cross-cultural E-mail.**

### ***Tips for using interactive voice response systems with Latin Americans***

- Do not use interactive voice response systems.
- If you must use voice response systems, keep it to a minimum. Hire a call center or answering service with real humans. It will help you keep customers.
- Do not cut corners! Use good Spanish. That means professional translators and good accents by native speakers of Spanish. Some of the poorest voice mail in the USA is done by well-meaning American Hispanics who do not know good Spanish. (For a great example of a terrible Tex-Mex accent, try Southwestern Bell’s Call Notes in Spanish.) Poor Spanish sounds unprofessional and is offensive to the very people you are trying to serve. **No Spanish is better than poor Spanish.**
- Return calls as soon as possible. Respond personally; never “pass callers off” to an associate.

in his book, *The Dance of Life*:

***“A Latin American does not simply act on the abstract assumption that the individual who has been waiting in line the longest is more important than his friend. If one has to wait, it simply indicates that either he is not connected (and therefore not worth bothering with), or he doesn’t know how to get along with others and has no friends. Either of these is an indictment.”***

Now think about how a Latino feels when he or she is told, “your call will

secretary connects the two. This method projects the image of an important person (i.e. one who has a personal secretary). Our Latin counterparts expect this protocol; without it, our principal can lose status in the eyes of a Latin person. The interpreted message is: “This person from Dallas must not be very important. He doesn’t even have a secretary!”

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