

Advertising: Lost in Translation

By Myrna Sonora

"Hispanic Marketplace" is dedicated to educating self-storage professionals about the possibilities of the burgeoning Latino market. The U.S. Hispanic population—and its buying power—is growing at an astounding rate, making it an attractive target for businesses that appreciate Latinos' loyalty to brands and reliance on word-of-mouth for making purchasing decisions.

Rou've decided to advertise in Spanish. After all, in the five largest states (California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey and Texas), if you're not marketing to Hispanics, you're missing 25 percent of the population. But what's the first step?

Chances are you'll turn to a Spanish speaker—or worse, some software-based language robot—to "translate" your advertising campaign. Oops! You've just made your first mistake in marketing to this audience. Advertising intended for Hispanic consumers should be written in Spanish, not *translated* to Spanish from English.

There's more to understanding a culture than what an online language translator has to offer. It's tempting to simply translate, but also potentially disastrous when you consider the subtleties in language. For example, the Spanish words for "embarrassed" and "pregnant" share the same root.

Another common error businesses make when advertising to Spanish speakers is using incorrect language or situations for a specific culture. For example, references to Cinco de Mayo, a popular Mexican holiday, have no significance for a Cuban or Guatemalan. Other cultural cognates have no relevance in the Hispanic world at all. For example, allusions to popular American songs, TV shows or movies, or traditions like "Monday Night Football."

Word choices—and accents—do matter. For example, "Ahorita" means "right now" or "a little later," depending on whether you're speaking to a Mexican or a Puerto Rican. And don't choose radio or TV talent with a



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Brazilian accent when you're trying to reach a Mexican audience. Consider this frame of reference: Consumers from Atlanta wouldn't readily warm up to someone with a Brooklyn accent trying to sell them healthcare or banking services.

These errors may seem innocent, but to Hispanics they're about as subtle as a sledgehammer. They act as assaults on the ear, sending a clear message: You truly don't understand your audience. By their culture

and tradition, Hispanics are polite and accommodating. They will never call attention to your language mistakes so as not to embarrass you. Even when directly asked for feedback, they will try to intuit the answer you want to hear.

The net result? Your message will never hit the target, and you'll never understand why. Think about it: In a world where a blonde is a "guera" in Mexico, a "rubia" in Cuba, a "catira" in Venezuela and a "mona" in Colombia, it pays to make the effort so your audience is responding to your ad, not wincing at your errors.

Is It Necessary?

An important question to ask yourself is whether you need to advertise in Spanish. Shouldn't you be seeking the bilingual consumer who speaks English? Consider this: 89 percent of U.S. Hispanics learn Spanish as their first language. It remains an active part of their upbringing and home life. If you advertise in Spanish, you'll speak the language of the home, and your message will be better suited to win the hearts of consumers whose purchasing power has surged to nearly \$700 billion.

Hispanics are enthusiastic shoppers, motivated by many of the same factors as the mainstream population. However, their language and values make them distinct. Trust plays a critical role in where they choose to shop and what they buy. Being treated with respect and warmth is especially important.

So do you need to advertise in Spanish? You decide. ■

Myrna Sonora is the director of Hispanic business for The Michaels/Wilder Group, a specialized advertising agency incorporating three divisions: Yellow Pages, Internet, and Recruitment Advertising. Based in Phoenix, the award-winning firm is celebrating its 15th year of business thanks to a loyal client base that includes hundreds of self-storage owners and managers. For more information, call 800.423.6468; visit www.michaelswilder.com.