



Closing the Gap

Sylvia Acevedo's firm, CommuniCard, LLC, has developed an entire line of communication tools aimed at the growing Spanish-speaking workforce.

By Emily Richwine

Growing up as a first-generation American in a Spanish-speaking household, Sylvia Acevedo learned the challenge of bridging the language gap at a very early age. As a young child, she served as an ambassador of sorts to her Mexican American family, often serving as family spokeswoman and translator.

"I had a really strong sense of language issues at a very early age," she says. "Wherever I was, it seemed like I was always translating. I've been helping people communicate my whole life."

As an adult, Acevedo saw more and more Spanish-speaking families like her own continue to change the demographic makeup of the United States, having a direct impact of many sectors of the American workforce. An industrial engineer by trade, Acevedo quickly identified the need to develop a product that would solve some of the most common everyday language issues. A little more than a year ago, the former corporate executive, who holds a bachelor's degree from New Mexico State and a master's degree from Stanford University, founded her own firm, CommuniCard, LLC, which specializes in the development of communication products.

The Austin, Texas-based firm has created an entire line of CommuniCards, laminated passport-sized guides that use simple illustrations to communicate certain tasks and tools specific to different work environments. Available as pocket guides or as a deck of cards, each CommuniCard focuses on a specific workplace environment, including lawn care, painting, demolition, drywall, irrigation, and housecleaning services. Individual illustrations communicate specific project aspects such as supplies, tasks, pay-per-hour rates, work experience, as well as general instructions.

"In my own research, I found that many Hispanic workers cannot read well enough to use dictionaries or translate written instructions from supervisors," Acevedo says. "The drawings were created so that the illustrations enabled communication without speaking. The CommuniCard tagline, 'The pictures to the talking,' captures the intent of the product."

The unique patent-pending communication tool targets one of the fastest-growing segments of the United States workforce. According to U.S. Department of Labor statistics, more than 1.7 million people of Hispanic or Latino background work in the United States. Although Acevedo had a built-in demographic, launching her own product was not easy.

“You don’t have a staff anymore,” says Acevedo, who used her own personal savings, as well as funds from several silent investors, to launch the firm. “It’s just you, and that’s always a challenge—all of the energy has to come from you.”

Acevedo spent months researching before settling on a prototype. Having some experience in product development, Acevedo first hired an outside market research firm, which conducted months of in-depth research regarding communication issues between English-speaking employers and Spanish speaking workers, covering a wide variety of aspects including work processes, illustration, the use of focus groups, translation, design, product materials and specifications, prototyping and testing, and printing the final product.

“Turning the idea into a product, and the product into a business, meant doing a lot of research,” Acevedo says. “I wanted a product where no translator or reference books were required, and no pronunciation, so people would not be embarrassed. With my cards, worksite managers do not need to be Spanish-language fluent, and Hispanic workers themselves do not need to be able to read in their own language. The pictures do that talking.”

Distribution, however, would prove to be one of the greatest challenges to face the fledgling company. “We thought the products would be perfect for rack display, but getting into distribution was harder than I’d imagine,” Acevedo says. Her persistence, however, has paid off remarkably. CommuniCards, which cost less than \$20 per set, are now available in specialty upscale hardware stores throughout the Southwest, as well as online. Acevedo long-term goal is to one day supply to national retail hardware superstores such as the Home Depot and Lowe’s.

In business just over one year now, Acevedo and her firm have already seen measurable success, selling more than 3,000 products in the first year. In addition to her many clients within the construction industry, Acevedo also recently teamed up with the Austin Police Department, developing a customized Police Traffic Stop line of products.

In June, CommuniCard, LLC, was honored with a Certificate of Appreciation by the Austin Police Department. The firm was also recognized as a creative business award finalist in Big Austin’s 2004 Small Business of the Year Awards. With the initial success of the CommuniCard products, Acevedo says she would now like to expand the line even further, possibly into other languages and industry, such as the medical field.

“There’s such a huge demand,” she says. “We’re really focused on closing the communication gap.”