



Bridging Language Barriers Leads to Unique New Business Ventures

BY MARY SCHNACK

Sylvia Acevedo found herself repeatedly translating job tasks to Spanish-speaking workers during a friend's home remodel.

She also watched other friends struggle to communicate with the people who cleaned their houses. Putting two and two together, she perceived that this major language problem existed not only in her area, but nationwide.

Acevedo knew that there had to be a better way for people who are not bilingual to communicate with workers who spoke only Spanish—and vice versa. But, how?

No stranger to the translator role, Acevedo comes from a Spanish-speaking household in Las Cruces, NM. Growing up, she routinely found herself in the role of ambassador for her family and their interactions with the American culture. She knew that a bilingual translator could solve many communication problems between people who speak different languages. However, she also knew that, in many situations, a translator is not always available or even practical.

As a bilingual industrial engineer, Acevedo was comfortable using technology to solve problems. That comfort, coupled with her entrepreneurial spirit, led to her creation of CommuniCards™, visual communication aids that include pictures to help those people who don't read or speak the languages.

Acevedo was no stranger to translation. She also was not stranger to contributing to, and creating, successful companies.

After receiving a bachelor's in industrial engineering with honors from New Mexico State University, she went on to receive a master's, also in industrial engineering, from Stanford University. She began her engineering career at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, CA, where she designed algorithms to optimize cargo loads for the Solar Polar space missions. She then moved to industry, and while at IBM, designed the manufacturing floor plan for the company's largest showcase manufacturing facility in San Jose, CA. Later, she served as a director for Dell

Computers, where she spearheaded the creation of the first Pan-American e-commerce Web site for Latin America.

Before CommuniCard LLC was even a dream, she founded REBA Technologies, where as vice president of sales and marketing, she led a company that focused on developing technology to enhance the operation of corporate data centers.

WHY COMMUNICARDS?

CommuniCards are trade-specific cards that focus on common tasks in the construction, housecleaning, and lawn service industries. At less than \$20 each, they originally were designed for use by construction managers and household operators who needed to relay instructions to individuals who don't speak English. For those seeking to learn the English or Spanish, the language translations are included.

"In starting CommuniCards, I didn't look at the Hispanic community as consumers, but as a demographic force having a major impact on U.S. society at large, Acevedo said. "In this way, I perceived a pressing social need and created a solution that will benefit both the Hispanic community and those who hire its members."

Data from the 2000 Census showed that the Hispanic population in the United States increased by 59.7 percent to 35.3 million; the last time such a major population boom took place was post-World War II. At 13 percent of the general U.S. population, Hispanics make up the second largest population group. Hispanics comprise 30 percent of the populations of California and Texas, and the Hispanic population has increased more than 100 percent in Georgia, Arkansas, Nevada, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Illinois.

More than 1.7 million people of Hispanic or Latino background are employed in the United States, according to U.S. Department of Labor statistics. Many of these individuals hold entry-level services jobs and do not speak English.

Experts predict that, by 2020, Hispanics will account for approximately 20 percent of the U.S. population.

To create the CommuniCards, Acevedo researched

communication issues between English-speaking employers and Spanish-speaking workers, interviewing nearly 1,000 individuals working in construction and domestic jobs throughout California, Georgia, North Carolina, New Mexico, and Texas. She chose illustrations of specific tasks and tools that make CommuniCards faster and easier to use than English/Spanish or Spanish/English dictionaries.

"Turning the idea into a product, and the product into a business, meant doing a lot of research," Acevedo said. "I wanted a product where no translator or reference books were required, and no pronunciation, so people would not be embarrassed."

The CommuniCards provide many benefits. The laminated, passport-size guides unfold accordion-style. Because they have been researched and tested for effectiveness on the job site, communication is no longer a barrier. Time and money is saved by getting the job done right the first time. Employers and employees feel comfortable knowing that the job is understood and can be accomplished correctly. For those seeking to learn Spanish or English, the CommuniCards even include language translations to further the communication process.

"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," she added. "As my business tag line says, "The pictures do the talking.™"

Headquartered in Austin, TX CommuniCards are available as pocket guides or as a deck of cards, with each one focusing on a specific task area. They also can be customized to fit different types of workplace environments, such as Police Traffic Stop CommuniCards and Domestic Violence CommuniCards.

