

INSIDE

AUSTIN BUSINESS

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Innovative Communication Made Simple

[BY : AMY E. LEMEN]

COMMUNICATION CAN BE CHALLENGING IF YOU'RE SPEAKING DIFFERENT LANGUAGES. Sylvia Acevedo saw the need for a tool to help facilitate understanding and bridge cultural barriers – and built a business around it.

Acevedo's innovative CommuniCard products help those who regularly work with people who primarily speak Spanish – in professions like construction and others – communicate effectively.

As an engineer by trade with degrees from the University of New Mexico and Stanford University, Acevedo knows the importance of communicating through technology. After working nonstop for such high profile companies as IBM, Apple Computer, AutoDesk and Dell, Inc., she decided to take a break. It was after working with friends who were in the remodeling and construction business that the light bulb went off for her. "I had friends who worked in construction, and saw that there was a real communication barrier," Acevedo recalls. "My friends had a lot of dictionaries and language CDs to help communicate with employees and contractors. It's always good to learn another language, but there was a need for on-the-spot communication."

Acevedo envisioned a pullout communication tool that was simple and easy to use. She thought it might resemble a map – a roadmap of communication – that was laminated, appropriately sized and could be used in all kinds of weather. The product also needed a name. "We tested names quite a bit," says Acevedo. "We got feedback from contractors and workers that CommuniCard worked best, so that's what we used."

Acevedo had an idea of what she wanted, but needed the services of a designer to bring her vision to market. She worked with Austin design firm Yellow Fin Studio and owner Tina Hudock to come up with the final concept – foldout guides that address language needs in such common construction areas as painting, sheetrock/drywall, clean-up/demolition, and irrigation/trenching.

Since then, Acevedo has gone beyond the construction industry. She and Yellow Fin also designed single cards – the size of playing cards – that can be used to communicate with domestic help (lawncare, gardening and housekeeping), and even the police/law enforcement sector. Police use the cards to communicate during traffic stops here in the U.S. and the Mexican government has worked with Acevedo to design a postcard to help curtail prostitution and show that it's illegal.

Both the cards and the foldout guide feature pictures that clearly illustrate certain tasks and language translation. And both are effective communications tools because of their design. "The products had to be friendly, easy to use and show the concepts quickly," says Acevedo. "Many of these workers don't have the opportunity for formal education. The cards and foldout guide needed that 'Aha!' moment right away, and Tina got it. When I saw it, that was it."



The deck of housekeeping cards contains 52 illustrations that cover a wide range of tasks. The product was designed so that the cards could simply be left out for the house cleaner in various areas of the house.

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RESEARCH PAYS OFF

One thing is certain: Acevedo needed to ensure the cards would be welcomed by the workers that were going to be using them, not just those who needed to communicate. So, she conducted extensive research with workers and supervisors in each field.

For the construction foldouts, which currently make up the build of the CommuniCard series, Acevedo tested on a local and national level, talking to contractors, builders, work sites, day laborers and groups of workers to get feedback.

She also spoke to domestic help, including housecleaners and those in gardening, to see what worked for them. Finally, Acevedo conducted exhaustive market testing and used focus groups for nearly every feature of the cards. “We always had respect in mind when doing the art and the drawings,” says Acevedo. “Some of the people have short hair, some long, with different outfits and different body types. We have made an effort to make people comfortable by creating the card with different genders, types of people and nods to both Spanish and American cultures.”

RESPECT AND CULTURE CHANGES

There were also some cultural challenges to consider when designing the cards. For example, Acevedo couldn't find the word for “pet” in Spanish because dogs are primarily used for protection in Central America and Mexico. “They're not seen as members of the family, like in the U.S., so we had to figure out a way to say ‘don't let the pets out’ so people would understand,” she says.

Another discovery was the television. One drawing had the housecleaner watching TV, but focus groups didn't like that. It turned out that they didn't watch TV; they only listened to it while they worked.

“We tested the products in New Mexico, Texas California and North Carolina and would add elements as we got feedback,” says Acevedo. “For example, there are a lot of different saws used in drywall, and workers would have trouble getting the right one, so we added pictures of the equipment, plus tasks and safety guidelines.”

Language was also important – especially the language most used, not necessarily the one that was correct. “People are trained in Spanish, but it's Spanish from Spain and workers couldn't understand it,” she says. “If you have no formal education, you learn language on the streets, or through the media. So we didn't use formal language on the cards. Our overall job is to communi-

cate, so most of the language is ‘Spanglish’ – a combination of Spanish and English.”

FAR-REACHING SUCCESS

Sales of the cards and foldouts are conducted primarily via the Internet, and Acevedo has been quite pleased with the results. In business for less than two years, she has sold “thousands” of CommuniCards and was recently honored as Businesswoman of the Year for Region 3 (includes a multi-state region in the southwest) by the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. “There aren't many Hispanic businesses that are creating tangible products, and that sets us apart,” says Acevedo.

With customers in 31 states, Acevedo gets orders from all over – including New Hampshire, Massachusetts and other northern states. “We see this as a product that can be used wherever people live, work and play,” she says. “It is so easy to use, and we have received great feedback on the design. As an engineer, those elements were important to me.”

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

CommuniCard is a virtual company – just as Acevedo envisioned it. She spent a lot of time on intellectual property issues and has patents pending for all products. Sales are mostly Web-based, and 15 part-time employees work via email and fax. Acevedo's brother, Mario, another engineer, is also an accomplished artist and is the illustrator of the cards.

Acevedo sees limitless possibilities for both the company and the concept. She says there's a need for more law enforcement cards, as well as cards for the medical field. Often, children are used as translators when there's an emergency. “We need to take the child out of the translation process,” she says. “There's a lot that can go wrong, with medication instructions and dosages. I see a lot of opportunities there.”

Future plans for the company include branching out to other languages; Acevedo tested the product in Chicago, and they wanted it in Polish. In Los Angeles and northern California, there's a need to communicate in Vietnamese.

“We're not a how-to, but a communications tool,” she says. “I see this as a product to be used wherever Americans live, work and play. There's a need for on-the-spot communication, whether it's in Spanish, French, German, Italian, Chinese or any other language.”

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