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You are here: US > Search > [PSAs that speak the right language](#)

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PSAs that speak the right language

Craig McGuire - 27 Mar 2006 00:00

While PSAs targeting Hispanics are growing, simply translating them from English isn't enough.

One in every seven people in the US today is Hispanic, according to the US Census Bureau. That represents a 41.3 million-strong demographic, expected to grow even larger as immigration and birth rates outpace growth of non-Hispanic blacks and whites.

But for PR pros creating PSAs, this is a complicated demographic with many different layers, dialects, and cultural differences to navigate.

To appreciate just how influential this audience is, consider that more than half of the 50 segments currently in production at nonprofit PSA powerhouse The Ad Council include a Hispanic-focused component.

"Although we often take on issues that impact both the general audience, as well as the Hispanic target, we make sure we talk to Hispanic consumers separately to ensure that we have a firm understanding of how cultural and language issues may impact social communications," says Priscilla Natkins, EVP and director of client services.

In short, it's not enough to just translate English-language scripts into Spanish.

"In our research, we often talk to different groups of Hispanic Americans, as we have found that there are some cultural and attitudinal differences among Cuban Americans, Mexican Americans and Hispanic adults emigrating from other countries," Natkins says.

The best way to reach a Hispanic audience is to make sure the message speaks specifically to the demographic.

"On a recent PSA we distributed on infant immunization, we reached out to PSA directors at Spanish-language stations to make sure they knew the message affected large portions of their audience because of disproportionate immunization levels in their communities," says Chris Sweet, manager of media relations at VNR-1 Communications. "This helped them accept the importance of the message and influenced their decisions."

First, PR pros need to select a media database and use that to locate local Spanish stations in various target markets. At the same time, look for network hubs and contact them, as many Spanish-language networks will distribute PSAs on their internal feed services, making them an extra arm of distribution, Sweet says.

Racel Martinez, account executive at Strauss Radio Strategies, advises on formats. "In order for most public service directors at radio stations to choose to air your PSA, you need to

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make sure you have sent your PSA, on CD, in a variety of lengths, at least a month before you would like it on the air," he says. "Make sure that the PSAs are scripted, reviewed, and voiced by fluent, native Spanish speakers, as opposed to staff who may have received some language training. The difference will be heard in the final product."

For Hispanic audiences, language is critical. "First of all, Hispanics understand Spanish, just as residents of Boston, Nashville, and LA understand English, though each region has a particular accent," says Larry Thomas, COO of Medialink. "It is best to find a Spanish-speaking person who has a rather neutral accent."

"Simply retooling a PSA that was originally written in English and then dubbing it over in Spanish can result in a poor showing," says Danny Maiello, VP at Fleishman-Hillard's Hispanic practice, FH Hispania. "Moreover, tailoring the language to specific regional Hispanic markets is key, such as in South Florida vs. LA vs. New York."

Also, keep in mind that when a PSA originates in English, often the message and nuance are lost in translation. If the English version is translated, make sure to use words that have a similar meaning across all the dialects.

As with PSAs in general, putting a celebrity mouthpiece on your production can be an asset, as well as a liability.

"If a celebrity is used, he or she should be well connected to the message conveyed in the PSA," says Bev Yehuda, VP of media relations at MultiVu. "And if a celebrity is used in a PSA being distributed to Spanish-language stations, that person should be well-known by the Hispanic audience."

Technique tips

DO

Invest in a subscription to a media database to help segment your demographics

Understand the cultural and attitudinal differences among the various Hispanic groups

Make sure all PSA-related materials are in Spanish (cover letter, fact sheet, and PSAs)

DON'T

Dub an English version into Spanish. The message and nuance are often lost in translation

Send out a message that is not applicable to the Hispanic community

Use any old star. Pick one with links to both the Hispanic community and the PSA subject

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