**HOW TO BUILD A BILINGUAL PRACTICE**

**By Janet C. Tacoronte**

**Introduction**

I am first generation American. My parents came to Florida from their respective countries when they were young teenagers. I grew up with my parents speaking to me in Spanish and me responding in English. I could speak Spanish, or rather, what we call Spanglish. My first job after law school was in the heart of Miami at a highly productive bankruptcy law firm that marketed solely to the Hispanic community.

Quickly, I found that my command of the Spanish language needed much improvement. For one, legalese in Spanish is not the same as your conversational Spanish. Fortunately, for me, many of the clients were happy to correct my botched Spanish, and I began learning the correct translations.

The most important things I learned at my first law job in that short year (before I burned out) are: 1) there is a huge market for non-English speaking clients 2) a lawyer’s office has to be prepared to accept clients that are not fluent in English, and 3) an English/Spanish Legal Dictionary is a necessity.

According to the [Census Bureau’s 2013](http://cis.org/record-one-in-five-us-residents-speaks-language-other-than-english-at-home) American Community Survey (ACS), the number of foreign-language speakers increased to 2.2 million people between 2010 and 2013. It has grown by nearly 15 million people (32 percent) since 2000 and by almost 30 million people since 1990 (94 percent). Therefore, not only should you research your legal market to determine if there is a niche that you can tap into, but you should also seek to provide a service to an otherwise unrepresented community.

When I commenced my solo practice, I learned that Spanish speaking clients were the best source of referrals. As a young solo attorney, I had a non-existent marketing budget. Being able to service my clients in their native language created trust and a natural report. Even if my clients spoke English the flexibility for them to discuss their case in either language made them comfortable. My clients showed gratitude by providing numerous referrals of their friends, colleagues, and family. I have had clients drive more than two hours to retain my services because of the lack of Spanish speaking attorneys in their areas. They are often frustrated when they cannot obtain the information they need in their language.

**Bilingual Practice Tips**

You do not have to be fluent in another language. I was not fluent when I began building my bilingual law practice. I would like to think I am now but maybe we should ask my clients that question. The Spanish language is not the only language in demand, Portuguese, Korean, Chinese, and French speakers are also in high demand.

1. Research your market. Is there a prevalent immigrant community near you that needs representation? Are their specific practice areas or niches such as immigration or workers compensation that you are interested in? Are there foreign investors coming to your area?
2. Hire bilingual staff. Anyone who communicates with your client on your behalf should be able to speak their language. If you accepted the case then clients should be able to call and schedule appointments and obtain general information from the staff without having a translator. In my case my secretary is fluent in Spanish. She communicates with the clients in either language comfortably. When my non English speaking clients appear at their §341 Meeting of Creditors and they have a translator. In fact, one of the questions asked by the trustee is whether their petition and schedules were explained to them in Spanish.
3. Explain translation costs to your clients. I do not need a translator in my office for Spanish but I have hired translators for other languages or for clients with disabilities. Translator costs should be explained to clients in the retainer, and usually, if the client needs a translator for a court hearing that fee has to be paid upfront. Ask for referrals from other attorneys on reliable translation services. Many of my clients speak English fluently but rather have a translator for court hearings.
4. Translate certain documents. For example, your retainer and intake sheet should be offered in English and the other language. Make sure the documents are translated correctly. Mistakes will not increase confidence in your firm. There are many freelance websites where you can find competent translators for a minimal price.
5. Market more efficiently. Advertise in the local foreign language newspaper. For one, local newspapers are cheaper than a large newspaper and its circulation will be precisely targeted. The same reasoning applies for Spanish, or other language, television and radio advertisements.
6. Improve yourself. Graciously, accept any corrections from your clients. I have been known to corner the court translator with a list of legal terms that I need help with. Listen to the radio in that language in the car. There are free apps, like Duolingo, you can use from your phone. These additional tasks not only improve your business, but also the activities sharpen your mind.
7. Offer to give free seminars to local groups and organizations. I find that education is the best way to market. When you become an authority on the subject people will be more likely to retain and refer you.

So embrace your heritage or even those three years of French or Italian you took in high school because that language experience may formulate a prosperous practice for you.

**About the Author**

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