

Opening *Puertas*¹ with Real Estate Spanish

Summary

To do business more successfully in its large Hispanic and Latino community, the Northern Virginia Association of REALTORS® developed a conversational Spanish course focusing on the specific needs of the real estate industry.

Background

More than 13,000 members of the Northern Virginia Association of REALTORS® (NVAR) serve a community of about 2 million residents of Fairfax and Arlington Counties, adjacent to Washington, D.C. In both counties, nearly one-third of the population speaks a language other than English at home. According to the 2000 census, 11 percent of Fairfax County residents and 18.6 percent of Arlington County residents are of Hispanic or Latino origin.

In 2002, Arlington County officials approached Pat Jablonski, then chairman of NVAR's Board of Directors, and voiced concerns that Hispanic and Latino residents were being scammed by people falsely claiming to be real estate brokers, but whose only true qualification was their ability to speak Spanish. Moreover, through no fault of their own, REALTORS® had acquired a negative image among many immigrant groups. "A lot of folks in this country, because of where they had lived before, really didn't trust governmental authority, or anybody who purported to be in charge," Jablonski said. "We realized that as real estate professionals we were lumped into that group."

What the Association Did

Members of NVAR's Equal Opportunity/Cultural Diversity Committee were already helping Northern Virginia residents in their search for affordable housing. Joining forces with the Housing Opportunities Alliance, the Committee studied the changing demographics of prospective homebuyers in Northern Virginia and found that 60 per cent spoke English as a second language. They recommended a Spanish class for real estate professionals, and NVAR quickly agreed.



Language courses. Ann Brady, NVAR's full-time manager for programs and awards, began to develop a beginner's Spanish course that focused on spoken language and was specific to real estate. It took Brady about 30 hours over the next three months to design classes to teach REALTORS® enough Spanish to get through a cold call and the basics of showing a house, including units of currency and setting appointment times.

Brady then enlisted the help of bilingual REALTOR® Luis Lama, a native of Peru. Both REALTORS® had experience as instructors in English as a second language (ESL), so they already knew the basics of classroom teaching. Lama volunteered his time during project development, when he designed a course outline, handouts, and quizzes.

Brady and Lama taught the first session as a team to see how well their design worked and they made a few modifications for the second session. Lama was paid only for his work as an instructor—he volunteered the development time. NVAR kept costs low by advertising the course to members through its standard publicity channels: e-mails, faxes, Web site, and newsletter.

Classes meet at NVAR headquarters for 90 minutes once a week for six weeks. Courses are limited to NVAR members and carry no Continuing Education credit. The fee is under \$50 and includes a Spanish-English dictionary that focuses on real estate terms. Class size is normally limited to 18 to promote a conversational environment.

An early lesson in the course is to assume that a potential client speaks English and introduce oneself accordingly. If the client hesitates and the agent suspects that Spanish would be preferred, the agent switches to Spanish, however limited his or her command of the language may be. *¿Habla usted Español?* (“Do you speak Spanish?”)

Brady explains: “If you speak only a few phrases...like *Buenos días* (“Good day”) and *¿Como está usted?* (“How are you?”)...people love it—at least you tried. It helps to break the barrier.”

Students concentrate on the most likely encounters in which Spanish would be helpful. For example, at an open house the first words to break the ice might be, *Hablo muy poquito Español, pero me gustaría ayudarle* (“I speak very little Spanish, but I would like to help you.”) Other common encounters are welcoming a new visitor to the office and handling phone calls in which the person on the other end speaks no English.

The course also emphasizes the importance of maintaining a list of highly qualified Spanish-speaking mortgage lenders. Students are encouraged to get a flavor of the language, hear themselves speaking the words, and become comfortable interacting in another language.

Although the course focuses on conversation, instructors find that cultural issues also arise. For example, Lama noted that in some Hispanic and Latino cultures it is thought inconsiderate to show up exactly on time, since the host might not be quite prepared. He encourages REALTORS® to keep this in mind when they make appointments and either stress the need for punctuality or anticipate delay. Members are also encouraged to take NAR’s At Home with Diversity® course.

Multicultural luncheons. The Equal Opportunity/Cultural Diversity Committee also initiated a series of luncheons that focused on geographic regions and cultures with a large representation in the Washington, D.C., area. These free luncheons offer an

opportunity for REALTORS® to increase their cultural awareness and to increase their involvement with NVAR activities.

The first luncheon, which took place in March, 2004, coincided with the Iranian New Year and featured traditional dishes provided by an Iranian-owned title company that sponsored the event and participated in discussions. Subsequent luncheons in 2004 focused on the cultures of Asia and Central and South America.

Outcomes

Brady feels that REALTORS® who take the Spanish course are becoming more aware of the need to be bilingual, understand key terms, and make an effort to serve all parts of the homebuying public. There is a general sense at NVAR that REALTORS® lose business if they do not at least try more bilingual communication. Brady was surprised to discover that many NVAR students in the course already had a working knowledge of Spanish but were afraid to use it.

The course proved immensely popular and now has a waiting list. In addition, NVAR has designed an intermediate course for those wishing to continue improving their Spanish language skills. The intermediate course will cover marketing, inspections, appraisals, and other necessary service steps to buying a home.

The multicultural luncheons have been well attended and have resulted in an increased participation at the committee and board levels of NVAR leadership. Past programs planned have included South Asian, Eastern European, African, and Pacific Rim/East Asian themes.

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