



The Language of Business

Adopting Private Sector Practices to Increase Limited-English Proficient Individuals' Access to Government Services

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While government agencies in the Bay Area and California have slowly begun to make their services more accessible to limited English proficient (LEP) individuals, many private businesses have long offered sophisticated multilingual services to their customers. This report examines private sector practices and describes how public agencies can increase their ability to serve immigrants and LEP individuals by adopting these business practices. We highlight the promising practices of five large corporations and a non-profit health organization, each of which has made substantial investments in serving their clients in non-English languages. We then offer a “checklist” that details how government agencies can implement these practices in a cost-effective manner. Finally, we provide a list of additional resources that will help agencies make their services more accessible to LEP individuals.

The entities surveyed in this report include Asian Health Services, Charles Schwab, Kaiser Permanente, Pacific Gas & Electric Company, SBC Communications, and Wells Fargo.

The diversity of California has compelled private sector institutions to take notice of the state's sizeable LEP population and develop services that cater to a multilingual marketplace. According to the 2000 Census, 40 percent of Californians speak a language other than English in the home, and one out of every five is LEP, or speaks English less than “very well.” That includes 4.3 million LEP Spanish speakers and 1.5 million LEP Asian language speakers across the state. For many years, forward-looking private sector entities have sought to break down language barriers and expand their service markets to include populations who prefer to communicate in languages other than English. The public sector can learn from the innovations achieved by these entities.

Promising Practices in the Private Sector

With the exception of Asian Health Services, a non-profit health organization founded to provide medical services to a diverse underserved Asian immigrant population in Alameda County, California, the corporations included in our survey were primarily moved to develop multilingual services because the competitive forces of the marketplace demanded it. Demographic research about the existing community and population trends, combined with customer surveys and focus groups, revealed that investments in bilingual staff and translated communications would pay off with an increased customer base and better consumer satisfaction.

These private sector institutions have developed sophisticated methods to provide services in multiple languages by emphasizing customer service through the hiring bilingual staff. These hiring practices include: (1) initial qualification testing at the appropriate language proficiency level; (2) regular monitoring of staff; (3) follow-up coaching by qualified supervisors; (4) development of a consistent use of terminology to avoid customer confusion; (5) customer surveys to evaluate satisfaction with services; and (6) adherence to any professional interpreter standards. They have also established dedicated bilingual offices, such as banking branches and health care “modules,” where customers can obtain a comprehensive line of services all in their preferred language. Some have invested in telephone call centers, which customers can access on a 24-hour basis to ask questions and receive information in a host of languages. All of these practices have focused on ensuring that LEP customers can speak to representatives in their preferred language and receive the same level of services as English-speaking customers.

These private sector entities have also recognized that good written translation of their communications is an important component of quality customer care. Translated materials are reviewed by a minimum of at least two qualified translators for accuracy, cultural appropriateness, and comprehension. They have also developed cost saving measures for translation, including: (1) developing standard lexicons of commonly used terminology to

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enhance translation memory; (2) centralizing translation resources; (3) recycling commonly translated passages and thereby avoiding duplicative translation; and (4) obtaining materials from outside translation vendors in electronic form so that future revisions of documents will not require re-translation. Private sector entities have also developed diverse methods of disseminating translated materials to their customers, including ethnic media and community fairs, as well as new technologies, electronic media, and the Internet.

This report also offers a glimpse at cutting-edge technologies that private-sector entities have employed to improve communications with LEP consumers, including (1) videoconferencing to provide customers with face-to-face oral interpretation, particularly useful in a health care setting; (2) translation memory software to promote consistency in multilingual written communications; and (3) simultaneous interpretation equipment to provide time-efficient quality interpretation for large group meetings in multiple languages when the primary information is delivered in English.

Translating Promising Private Sector Practices Into More Accessible Government Programs

We recognize that government agencies are quite different from private companies and face a number of challenges in adopting private sector practices. The second section of this report takes the lessons learned from the private sector and offers a guide to public agencies interested in adopting private sector practices to make their services more accessible to LEP individuals. We present public agencies with a “checklist” for implementing language accessible services, based on the promising practices of the private sector.

- ✓ *Assess the Language Needs of the Constituency.* Before embarking on a plan to make services more accessible to LEP individuals, it is critical that agencies understand the needs of both the current and potential client populations in their service areas. Readily available demographic data, client and community surveys, tracking language preferences on client databases, and assessing existing multilingual resources are all important elements of determining the language needs of a client population.
- ✓ *Implement a Comprehensive Document Translation Plan.* Private sector translation practices offer a quality document translation procedure that includes, at a minimum: (1) identifying and prioritizing documents for translation; (2) competent initial translation; (3) second review of translation by another competent translator; (4) review for cultural competence and comprehension; and (5) focus group and field testing of documents prior to release.
- ✓ *Hire Qualified and Competent Bilingual Staff.* Agencies should ensure that all employees who utilize their language skills have been tested at an appropriate level for their task.
- ✓ *Achieve Efficiencies through Pooled Translation and the Use of Call Centers.* Public agencies can achieve cost efficiencies in translation and interpretation by increasing their economies of scale through centralized translation across local offices or even across agencies.
- ✓ *Implement Quality Control.* Agencies should monitor and train staff to ensure the quality of both their translated written materials and non-English spoken language services. Poor quality multilingual communication can be just as inaccessible to LEP individuals as English-only services.
- ✓ *Know the Community and Respond to Community Needs.* Agencies should use a community-based review process, including targeted focus groups and surveys, to ensure their services are responsive to actual community needs. Agencies should also track immigration and local population trends to address emerging language needs.
- ✓ *Publicize in Ethnic Media and at Community Events.* Ethnic media and community events offer low-cost means of information dissemination to large LEP populations.
- ✓ *Create and Oversee a Language Access Plan.* An effective language access plan provides both the agency and the community with a clear understanding of the policies and procedures for providing language accessible services.

Resources to Make Services More Accessible

In recent years, a number of resources have emerged to help institutions, particularly government agencies and those providing health care, to make their services more accessible to LEP populations. In the final section of this report, we provide a summary of informative Web sites, publications describing language access laws that apply to public agencies and promising language access practices, and other resources.