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# Spanish speakers cite service communication gap

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By Del Jones, USA TODAY

AT&T first noticed frustration among Spanish-speaking customers 25 years ago. Their inability to understand and to be understood when they called to complain angered and frustrated them.

"It was clear that we were going to lose customers," says Jody Garcia, vice president of diversity marketing.

Today, AT&T has identified 2 million U.S. customers who prefer Spanish. When they call, AT&T's computers identify their phone numbers and automatically route them to a customer service representative who answers in Spanish.

But according to a 90-question survey of 1,501 Spanish-speaking households, a communication gap persists at many companies, and customers continue to get upset. The survey found that Spanish speakers are not only more likely to be perturbed than English speakers when they encounter a product or service problem, they are also more likely to expect to be mollified with refunds and free products, and are more likely to tell their friends about a negative episode.

The survey is called *¡Ayúdame!*, which means "Help me!" It was taken in late 2006, and the results released just as immigration-reform legislation is being debated. Last month, the Senate voted 63 to 34 to make English the national language if the bill becomes law.

The survey of Spanish speakers was compared with identical questions given to the general population in a 2005 survey called *Customer Rage*. Both surveys, conducted by Customer Care Measurement & Consulting, focus on people who had a product or service problem in the previous 12 months. Of those, 70% of those who spoke English wound up being extremely or very upset, vs. 90% for Spanish speakers. Among Spanish speakers, 38% threatened to go to a lawyer or the news media, vs. 12% among English speakers. The margin of error was plus or minus 2 to 3 percentage points.

The Spanish survey was funded by Language Line Services, which provides telephone interpreters for three-way calls when there is a language barrier. The results surprised many consumer experts.

Calls to six Better Business Bureaus nationwide found that all have added Spanish-speaking staffers because of demographic changes. But none said they noticed a higher level of anger among those who complain in Spanish. Margaret Perez, president of the El Paso Better Business Bureau, said the results will likely spur research at her office. More than 80% of the residents in her area have Hispanic surnames, yet account for just 30% of complaints to the BBB so far in 2007, down from 42% in 2005.

Perez says she lived in Mexico for a time and was surprised when she bought dead batteries from a store and was not allowed to exchange them. Such exchanges, all but taken for granted in the USA, are rare in Mexico, she says. But that cultural difference seems to conflict with the survey's findings. For example, 65% of Spanish speakers want a refund, vs. 43% of English speakers.

However Scott Broetzmann, president of Customer Care Measurement, says the survey data is unbiased and "ahead of the curve."

Internal AT&T surveys find that their Spanish-speaking customers are as happy, or happier, than English-speaking customers, Garcia says. AT&T has not experienced backlash from English-only proponents. Quite the opposite, she says. "The marketplace says, 'Bravo.' "

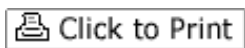
Rob Toonkel, spokesman for U.S. English, a group that wants to preserve English because they say it plays a unifying role, says he doesn't object to private businesses serving customers in Spanish, but that in a nation where 300 languages are spoken, customers should not expect or demand any language except English. "It underscores the importance of learning English," he says.

Communication barriers are also an issue for English speakers. A study by CFI Group to be released June 12 that uses the University of Michigan's American Customer Satisfaction Index data found that when customer service representatives were difficult to understand, customers were more than five times likely to take their business elsewhere. Of those customers who said they had a communication problem, 51% believed the customer service representative was working outside the USA, such as in India, where many companies have outsourced their call centers.

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