

International Employees

Entrepreneur Helps Food Service Managers & Employees Break Through Language Barrier, Speak Their Mind

Hugh Avera helps people to communicate. The founder and president of N. Carolina-based Spanglish Unlimited invented an innovative way of helping Spanish speakers and English speakers get their ideas across to one another in a workplace environment.

It all started in his hometown of Raleigh when he was hired to help a local housekeeping firm made up of 95 percent Spanish speakers. "I taught Spanish to the owners and English to the employees, and then helped them practice together," he recalled.

"That's a lot of our niche," continued Mr. Avera, "getting Spanish speakers and English speakers at the same table."

Soon he was developing industry-specific tools to help both sides of the fence speak and understand key on the job phrases. "The quick reference guide for the restaurant industry was our first product," designed for Golden Corral Corp., "our first customer."

The restaurant chain asked Mr. Avera to "design and develop a program to support English and Spanish in the workplace." So he came up with a pocket guide for managers that

contained many of the phrases and sentences, printed in phonetic English, that they might need to say to their Spanish-speaking employees over the course of a day. For the employees, he developed posters and cheat sheets specific not only to Golden Corral, but also to the specific stations where Spanish-speaking employees might be working, for example, at the grill, or restocking the salad bar.

"It was a natural route for me to take," said Mr. Avera. "I lived in Spain for a few years teaching English" before he returned home to Raleigh.

While teaching English as a second language at the community college level, and Spanish at the high school level, he realized he could fill a real void in the business community.

Considering "growth in the Latino population," he said, it was "pretty obvious there was a market for books, teaching methodologies, learning-friendly format." He had already developed some tried and true techniques to teach students a new language as quickly as possible during his work during the summer accompanying groups to Costa Rica, where they could become "immersed in a Spanish-speaking

culture and experience a rain forest environment." He decided to apply these methods to a business-oriented environment,

Working with Golden Corral "really put us on the map" recalled Mr. Avera. He soon recognized the growing "need outside of our region." His products now include a Kitchen Dictionary, a Hospitality Dictionary, and a Spanglish Workbook.

What sets his products apart from your average pocket dictionary? Mr. Avera pointed out that they're "geared towards both learning English and learning Spanish." Besides having a dual purpose, Spanglish Unlimited products get right to the point.

In his industry specific manuals and posters, "a lot of words are eliminated," said Mr. Avera. "If you're working in the kitchen, you don't really need to know the word for printer cartridge."

Mastering short phrases, they use frequently "gives people the confidence to learn more." After becoming more comfortable with "communicating on the job," they're more likely to "take it to the next level."

"It's based on how I learned Spanish," explained Mr. Avera, "learn ten to forty phrases

consistently, and then pick up and extend your vocabulary."

As opposed to a generic dictionary or class, Spanglish Unlimited programs "bring both Spanish and English speakers to the same table at the same time."

The phonetic friendly guides help learners "sound it out." In the end, both sides "really help each other practice." The guides encourage employees to start simple conversations, "giving people the confidence to try to make the effort."

It's all about "drawing out the English or Spanish in [the speaker's] native language," and "taking some of the foreignness out of learning the language."

Often, the first few steps are the most important since, initially, speaker's who "don't want to sound silly, or don't want to say the wrong thing, won't try." According to Rebecca Todd, program designer, Golden Corral Corp., her company turned to Spanglish Unlimited looking for something to help with communicating between management and Spanish speaking co-workers.

"We met with Hugh, and created a Golden Corral-ized pocket dictionary." The spiral bound, tabbed, quick reference guide provided managers with

the tool they needed to get the ball rolling. She now always makes sure to hand one over during management training to each new recruit "heading out to the job."

And the posters for employees, from the baking station to the grill cook, to the hot cook, were "area specific," providing just the right amount of information at the right time."

The poster by the time clock provides assistance for employee's clock, "of someone wanted to say, 'I need some time off,' or 'this time card doesn't look right.'"

According to Ms. Todd, what "sets the product apart, is the translation in phonetics of [the speaker's] native language."

"People that know about the program, love it," she continued but there's "still the opportunity to tell a lot more people about it."

"Hugh has a good thing going for himself," concluded Ms. Todd, "It's a good concept. Now we just have to spread the word."