

What I learned about EPA's Latino Community and Computer Usage (Spring 2002)

In the six months I've spent working with on this project, I have discovered a few things that may helpful for others hoping to work with the Latino Community in EPA in the future.

The first thing that I learned is that language is key. When I open my mouth and speak with native Spanish, people automatically become brighter, more cooperative, and happy to talk. It means a lot to the Latinos that the person trying to communicate with them is not only speaking their language, but has speaks it the same way they do, with a native accent. The generation of Latinos that was born here is less excited about this issue, and prefer to speak English anyway, but most people over 20 showed a happy gratitude when realizing I was speaking in familiar tongue.

The second thing I learned is that there is a racial gap. While African Americans, Latinos and Pacific Islanders all have similar needs (jobs, inexpensive housing, etc.), they don't all have similar wants. Latinos prioritize many things differently than members of other races. Again, this is changing with newer generations, but there are still enough Latinos who have spent more time outside the US than inside it to have their heart set on their home country. Latinos love soccer, watch TV, work from very early in the morning to very late at night just to survive, leaving little room for leisure. They don't really care about the community (though newer generations are starting to), because they don't really own the community. They do care about the community in the sense that they want safe streets, better education for their kids, etc., but their sense of "EPA is my HOME" isn't nearly as established as it is for the African American community. Many Latinos really don't care about US politics, city politics, etc., they just want to make enough money to live a good life and send money home. Many Latinos don't value their own education very much - they would like to get more education, but they realize that realistically they can't pull it off, since they have to work, so they focus on letting their kids get a better education. Latinos have many friends and relatives in Mexico or other countries of Central and South America. They keep close ties with them and strive to keep up to date with what's going on in their home countries. Latinos watch Spanish TV, and don't really make an effort learn English and become a part of US culture. They have everything they need without having to go through a cultural and linguistic metamorphosis: they have their taquerias, mercados, TV and Radio stations, and most of all, their fellow Latinos.

Lest you think that the previous generalizations about Latinos were in some way unfair, let me go on to the third thing I learned: there is an age gap. Most of the things I said in the previous paragraph apply to the older generation of Latinos, who moved to EPA recently. This generation tends to speak very little English, doesn't use computers, doesn't really know enough about the Internet to know that they can use it rather easily and gain from it without difficulty (but is interested in someday using the Internet), focuses on working over personal education. The younger generation of Latinos, people generally under the age of 25, was either born here or has spent a substantial amount of time in the US. They tend to be bilingual, have extensive computer experience, manage a busy schedule of working and studying, because they really value their personal education, and have less ties to their or their parents' home country. In the surveys this

age gap is pretty clear, though both old and new generations have people in their 20s representing them.

The fourth thing I learned is that there is interest in community participation and technology adoption, but there is a huge communication gap. Many Latinos are so focused on their jobs and micro-communities that they don't realize what opportunities are out there for them. In the surveys many Latinos expressed interest in taking computer classes, though they didn't know where to get them. They also expressed a desire to be able to find support information more easily; information as in legal counseling, educational support, financial support, housing support, etc. Most of the communication comes through word of mouth, but there are times when you can't find the right people to answer the right questions, so an information source would be beneficial. Orchestrating the Latino community to come together shouldn't be too hard, given that St. Francis has such a strong presence and the markets and restaurants get non-stop business. There also seems to be a growing number of Latinos getting involved in OEPA meetings and events like this, so working through that venue. There is interest, and there is potential, but it will take strong Latino community leadership to jump in and advertise in the churches, taquerias, markets and neighborhoods.

I already sent you my contacts, and the survey data has been partially analyzed to answer some of the basic questions. I will make only a few brief comments on the survey's discovery of computer usage. First of all, a suprisingly high number of Latinos use computers (42%). Of these users, most of them use the computer at home (82.7%) and a third have Internet access at home (33.82%). Three-fourths of the computer users are avid computer users, meaning they use the computer 3 or more times a week (39.29% use 6-7 days a week, 35.71% use 3-5 days a week). It should be noted that there is an age gap, though. 63.64% of Latinos 25 and under use a computer, while only 30.42% of Latinos over 25 use a computer. This age difference also accounts for types of activities being accomplished through the computers. Latinos 25 and under tend to use their computers (and the Internet) for schoolwork, games, downloading music, surfing the web and chatting, while people over 25 tend to use them for research, work, job searches and flight information.

Based on the survey data, my conversations with community members and my observations throughout my time in EPA, I believe there is a great potential for serving the Latino community through EPA.net. It will take work, however. We know what they want; local news, hometown news, job information, housing information, legal information, and they are willing to go to the library or some other community center to use the Internet for this information (91.04% are willing to do this). It is a matter of compiling the information and getting the word out, because the interest is definitely there. And we know that getting the word out can be done through the churches and markets, so that shouldn't be a problem either.

These are my lessons learned. I hope they are useful to my successor.

It's been great working with you. I'm attaching the newest version of the Survey data and analysis, with my "Latino Community" analysis added.

Keep up the good work!

Ben