

# Consulting Pioneer Reaps Big Growth

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Carla L. Martinez had her work cut out for her when she opened shop as the first Spanish-English, bilingual retirement-services consulting outfit some four years ago. Her education and communications concern, for instance, remains the only such enterprise targeting America's fast-growing Hispanic workforce in the industry.

Still, Martinez' Hermosa Beach, California-based firm racked up a whopping 100 percent growth rate in terms of revenue last year over 2001, recording its best year ever, despite economic and market woes. One reason for her success lies in undeniable demographic trends. The U.S. Hispanic workforce and population figures have grown faster than those of both the black and non-Hispanic whites in recent years.

Some of Buenfuturo LLC's partners and sponsor clients include Fidelity Institutional Brokerage Group, Delaware Investments, John Hancock Funds, Union Bank of California and Edelbrock, a Torrance, California-based auto-parts concern. Buenfuturo provides print, online and in-person enrollment material and services and pre-enrollment products, in addition to plan-analysis services. Most of the firm's clients report six percent increases in participation rates among their Latino DC participants for last year, said Martinez, who is president of Buenfuturo.

The Fido brokerage group tapped Buenfuturo in August to provide print and online Spanish-language retirement plan materials and enrollment meeting services for the

provider's Practice Advantage Program. The Fido program targets such financial-services partners as RIAs, financial reps at brokerages and TPAs, who in turn can use the Spanish-language products and services to expand their respective client base.

Some of the challenges in raising Hispanic workers' DC participation rates stemmed from their deep suspicions of financial institutions, as many were born in countries where that sector is either underdeveloped or steeped with corruption. Enron and Worldcom aside, Martinez stresses the relative sophistication of the U.S. financial system, which is kept in check by various industry and government watchdogs.

"Some were also suspicious of the company matching feature, they didn't understand why companies would give 'free' money," she said. Buenfuturo's Spanish-language retirement trainers get over that hurdle by explaining that sponsors want to offer such benefits for retention and productivity purposes, and to take advantage of certain tax breaks.

Though the bulk of Latino workers is concentrated in blue-collar, manufacturing jobs, the group's middle class has grown from about 1.5 million in 1979 to 2.7 million in 1998, a huge 80 percent jump, according to Buenfuturo. Martinez notes that face-to-face, on-site enrollment meetings held in Spanish are the most effective way to reach out to the Hispanic worker. "Trust is very important," she notes.

Also, online tutorials and other materials tend to work well as reinforcement and supplemental information, but Martinez stressed that conversational, rather than formal Spanish was key. She discourages straight translations from English into Spanish, noting that approach could lead to some big misrepresentations. She also pointed out that keeping the message basic, with the use of understandable examples, is highly effective.

The Hispanic population in the U.S. now stands at about 37 million, while blacks number about 36.2 million, according to a recent New York Times article. The figures, estimates from July 1, 2001 over the previous year, showed that the Latino population grew by 4.7 percent, verses .3 percent for the white, non-Hispanic population.

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