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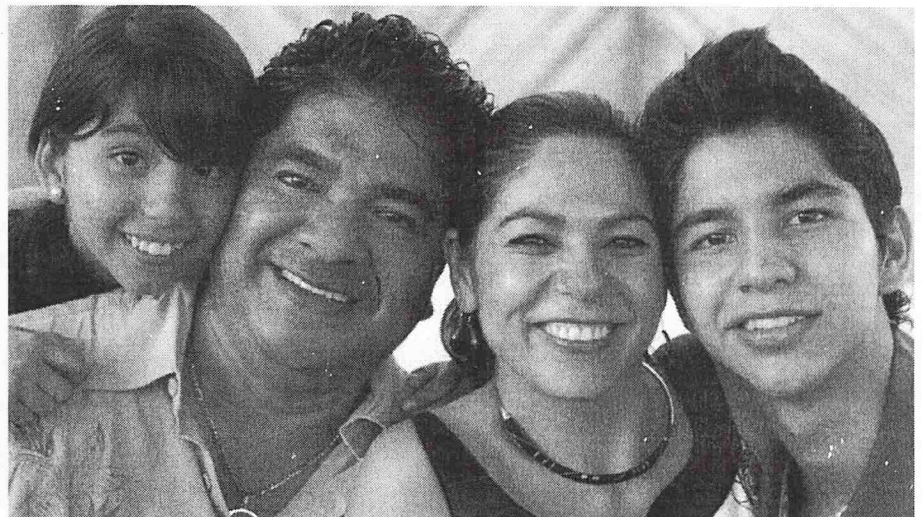
Practitioner

Representing the Latino Client

Understanding Cultural Expectations

By Rita M. Lauria

Representing the Latino client brings an array of challenges. Lawyers whose practices focus on representing the Latino population often find themselves meeting their clients on weekends, long after regular business hours, in the hospital, at the local church, or even at the local flea market. It may be long after the traditional business day has died down. Or it may be Sunday. But accommodation and accessibility are key to success when helping this segment of the U.S. population.



Juan Marcos Gutiérrez-González, Consul General of Mexico in Los Angeles, estimates more than 3.8 million people of Mexican origin reside in Los Angeles County alone. According to the U.S. Census, these include 2.2 million entitled to dual citizenship. Dual citizens are those who were born in the U.S. to a Mexican born father or mother. About 1.6 million of the 3.8 million Mexicans in LA County were born in Mexico. Out of this number about half those are estimated to be undocumented. In the City of Los Angeles, both Mexican-Americans entitled to dual citizenship and Mexicans born in Mexican territory, regardless of their migratory status, account for about 1.35 million people.

Los Angeles is one of the most diverse cities in the world, with the 3.8 million people of Mexican heritage in Los Angeles accounting for only a portion of the area's whole Latino community. The city boasts of Latino people not only from Mexico but also from the various countries of Central and South America. While some of the differences and difficulties between Spanish-speaking countries are shared, each country, or even region of a particular country, brings a different set of factors to be considered when representing the Latino client.

For instance, the indigenous people from Oaxaca, Mexico, while Mexican, cannot be stereotypically considered the same as the northern people from Chihuahua, Mexico. Nor can the Ecuadorians from Quito be considered the same as those from Quayaquil. While all are considered Latino, each has different cultural traditions and communication practices that become barriers to be bridged for successful representation of the client. But first this takes multi-cultural awareness of these differences and the desire to understand or at least to endeavor to learn about the differences of the Spanish-speaking cultures.

Notwithstanding these cultural and communication differences, it goes without saying that one of the greatest barriers to representing the growing Latino population is the language barrier. Lawyers who set up shop representing the Latino client often staff their office with a Spanish-speaking paralegal or legal assistant. This staff will answer phones and do the initial intake work towards assessing the case. A practice focusing on Spanish-speaking clients can grow quite rapidly simply by word of mouth. And the office must be prepared to handle this growth. This means having fluent Spanish-speaking staff in place.

Consul General Gutiérrez-González says, however, the matter of language is not necessarily merely the problem of not being able to speak Spanish. Another prob-

lem is being able to explain certain legal concepts, even if fluent in Spanish.

For instance, Gutiérrez-González says people in Mexico just don't know anything about the death penalty

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because it is not part of the Mexican legal system as the death penalty is considered cruel and unusual punishment. While explaining certain legal concepts even to the most informed may pose certain challenges, explaining the same legal concepts to the Mexican client poses other significant problems that have to be anticipated.

Generally, lawyers representing Latino clients spend a lot of time with their clients. Their first priority with this clientele should be to build trust rather than merely offer services. Building trust in a community largely made up of working-class immigrants, many times who come from rural towns of Mexico, Central America, or South America, means extending a patient and compassionate hand to those often unfamiliar with the language, customs, the legal system of the United States. These people are often timid about seeing a lawyer. So counsel has to do something different to reach out to them.

Reaching the Spanish-speaking community is different than trying to reach English-speaking clients. Lawyers who focus on serving the Latino community may go a step further and do things they wouldn't normally do if they were only trying to reach English-speaking clients. This can mean seeing clients outside the office or going to the hospital or to a nursing home to see a client. Some lawyers or law firms sponsor civil rights seminars or scholarships to begin the process of relationship building. Others who represent the Latino community may even set up shop in the local flea market or other market where the people shop. Reaching out and building trust in this community means going where the people are and being part of the community.

When meeting a new Latino client, it's a good idea to tell the client about oneself, especially before asking personal questions. If the first meeting is set in the office, the lawyer may want to point out his or her framed licenses and diplomas on the wall. This type of interaction can be a first step in developing a personal relationship and can lead to developing the type of trust generally associated with the small-town law office

where the trusted authority figure deals with everything no matter how great or how small.

The willingness to spend a little extra time doing small things one would not usually do when focusing on an English-speaking clientele can pay off greatly when working with the Latino client. For instance, handing out self-addressed envelopes can help ensure mail associated with the case arrives safely. Often clients cannot read letters received in the mail, but they know these letters look official. If they think the official-looking mail might have something to do with their case, the self-addressed envelope comes in handy to get the mail sent to the law office. The self-addressed envelopes also help direct payments to the office because the envelopes are addressed correctly.

Lawyers representing the Latino client have to commit to the client to explore all possible avenues and remedies before taking any action that will cost the client money. Consul General Gutierrez-Gonzalez suggests the lawyer or law firm become educated about the programs and resources available through the Mexican Consulate in Los Angeles and the partnerships established there. Gutierrez-Gonzalez says the Consulate offers programs and remedies that can be very valuable to the Latino client and invites lawyers to explore these.

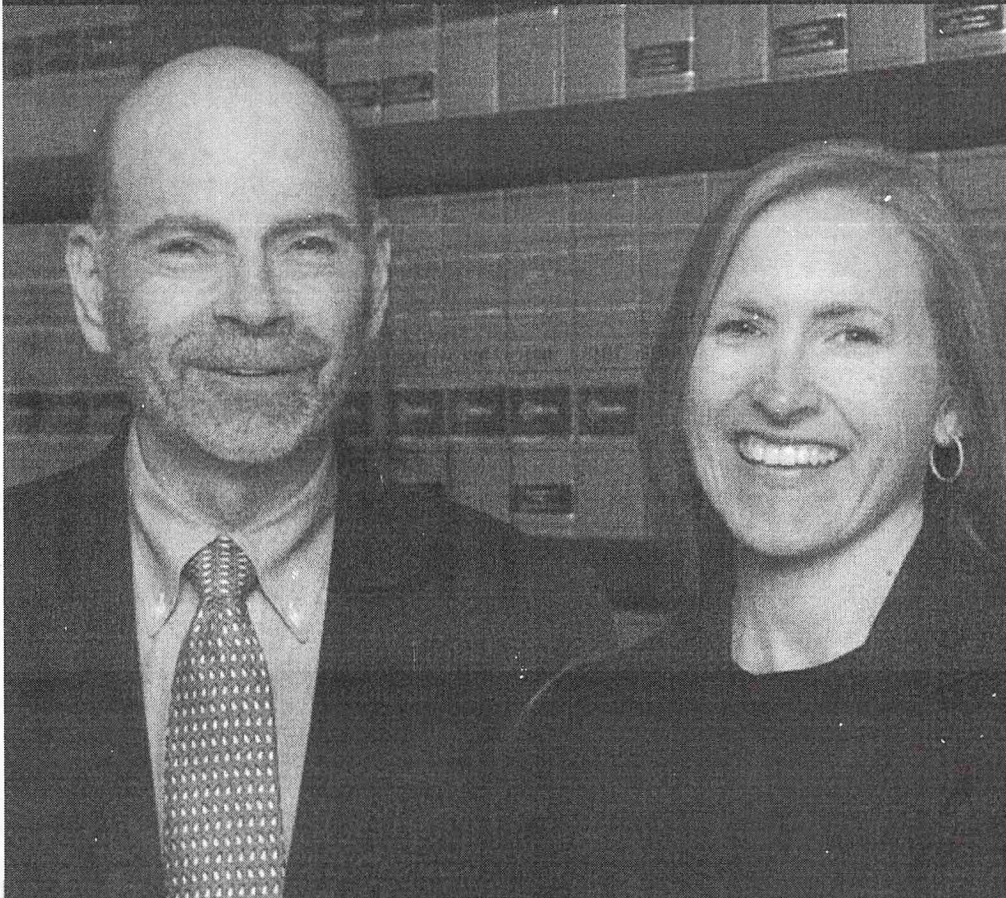
Word of mouth spreads quickly in the Latino community. Doing small things for your Latino client, showing compassion and patience, will ultimately serve you well. The lawyer who can bridge the cultural and communication barriers to build trust will in the long run build a growing practice as word of mouth referrals become the mainstay of the practice.

A little extra can go a long way to build a relationship that may be passed from generation to generation as families grow older and extend. The lawyer who becomes the trusted figure around who the family grows and extends realizes not only the security of earnings, but also the happiness of seeing new faces as babies are born and families grow older and larger.

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**Evan A. Jenness and
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defense a federal criminal matter
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