

Representing the Latino Client



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Representing the Latino client brings an array of challenges. You can meet these challenges. But accommodation and accessibility is key to success when helping this segment of the U.S. population.

More than 3.8 million people of Mexican origin are estimated to 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 L.A. County were born in Mexico.

Los Angeles is one of most culturally diverse cities in the world. Latino people from not only Mexico but also from the various countries of Central and South America live in Los Angeles. 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. 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 becomes a necessity when representing such diverse populations within the Latino community.

One of the greatest barriers to representing the growing Latino population is the language barrier. Lawyers who represent the Latino client often staff their office with a Spanish-speaking paralegal or legal assistant. This staff may focus on answering phones and doing the initial intake work in order to assess the case. A practice focusing on Spanish-speaking clients can grow quite rapidly simply by word of mouth. The office needs to be prepared to handle this growth. Having fluent Spanish-speaking staff in place can allow this growth.

Even if fluent Spanish-speaking capacity exists in the law office, often the ability to effectively explain certain legal concepts poses a challenge. For instance, according to the former Consul General Gutiérrez-González of the Consulate General of Mexico in Los Angeles, people in Mexico know very little, if anything, about the death penalty. The death penalty is not part of the Mexican legal system as the death penalty is considered cruel and unusual punishment in Mexico. Explaining certain legal concepts such as the death penalty even to the most informed among us can pose certain challenges. Explaining the same legal concepts to the Mexican client poses other significant problems. These must be anticipated.

Generally, lawyers representing Latino clients spend a lot of time with their clients. And their first priority should be to build trust. Building trust in a community of people, many of whom come from rural towns of Mexico, Central America, or South America, means more than merely welcoming the client into the office. Building trust often means extending a patient and compassionate hand to those often unfamiliar with the language, customs, and the legal system of the United States. The Latino client can often be timid about seeing a lawyer. One must do something different to reach out to these clients.

Reaching the Spanish-speaking client can be very different than trying to reach English-speaking clients. Lawyers who focus on serving the Latino community may need to go a step further. Such lawyers may find themselves doing small things they wouldn't normally do if they were only trying to reach English-speaking clients. The attorney may need to see clients outside the office or may need to go to the hospital or to a nursing home to see a client. Some lawyers or law firms sponsor various events, like 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 go and becoming part of the community.

When meeting a new Latino client, it's a good idea to take some time to tell the client about you. This is especially true before asking personal questions of the client. At the first meeting, if set in the office, the lawyer may point out one's framed licenses and diplomas on the wall. This type of interaction can signal an initial step in developing a personal relationship. This type of interaction can and may 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. However, the same client may know these letters look official. If the client thinks the official-looking mail might have something to do with their case, the self-addressed envelope will aid in getting mail sent to the law office. Accurately self-addressed envelopes can also help direct payments to the office.

Lawyers representing the Latino client must commit to explore all possible avenues and remedies before taking any action that will cost the client money. Several very valuable programs and resources are available through the Mexican Consulate in Los Angeles. Lawyers should explore these.

Word of mouth spreads quickly in the Latino community. Doing small things for your Latino client, like showing compassion and patience, will ultimately serve you well. Lawyers 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.