

# TOLL-FREE CUSTOMER SERVICE TELEPHONE LINES: ARE THEY ACCESSIBLE FOR SPANISH-SPEAKING CONSUMERS?

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## ABSTRACT

A survey of companies whose products list toll-free customer service numbers shows that a majority of these companies' service centers have Spanish-speaking representatives who can assist consumers who prefer to speak Spanish rather than English. However, additional analysis reveals several formidable obstacles in the customer service process that discourage Spanish-speaking consumers from utilizing these services. Because the number of Spanish-speaking consumers in the United States is growing rapidly, consumer affairs managers should endeavor to improve their companies' toll-free customer service systems. Based on the findings from this study, it is recommended that consumer affairs managers implement and promote separate toll-free customer service numbers specifically for their Spanish-speaking customers.

## INTRODUCTION

During the past decade there has been a dramatic transformation in the manner in which dissatisfied consumers communicate their complaints to companies whose products they have purchased. With the advent of toll-free telephone systems, many progressive companies, particularly in the consumer products arena, have encouraged customers to call their service representatives directly, rather than taking the time and effort to write a letter, to express their complaints or questions (Garrett and Meyers 1996; Martin and Smart 1994). By all accounts, it appears that these toll-free customer service telephone numbers have proven to be beneficial for both consumers and consumer affairs managers as they endeavor to maximize customer satisfaction (SOCAP 1992).

While these toll-free customer service telephone systems appear to work very well for most consumers, concerns remain regarding the status of vulnerable consumers. Andreasen and Manning (1990, p. 13) define vulnerable consumers "as those who are at a disadvantage in

exchange relationships where that disadvantage is attributable to characteristics that are largely not controllable by them at the time of the transaction." According to Andreasen and Manning (1990), examples of vulnerable consumers include children, the elderly, the uneducated, the structurally poor, the physically handicapped, ethnic and racial minorities and those with language problems. Additionally, they note that despite the fact that vulnerable consumers have much to lose when they are dissatisfied with their purchases, vulnerable consumers appear to be less likely than other consumers to pursue constructive complaining options. Although little research has specifically analyzed vulnerable consumers' complaining behavior, Andreasen and Manning (1990) suggest that vulnerable consumers may not complain because they have fewer options for complaining.

## OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this research project is to investigate how well toll-free customer service telephone systems function for one specific group of vulnerable consumers, Hispanic consumers in the United States who speak Spanish rather than English. Andreasen and Manning (1990) specifically highlighted Hispanics as one of the notable vulnerable groups that has been largely ignored in the consumer satisfaction research field. Therefore, this study will analyze whether or not toll-free customer service telephone systems, which apparently serve quite well the needs of English-speaking consumers, can accommodate the Spanish language needs of Hispanic consumers who call with questions or complaints about their purchases.

We will begin by discussing in more depth the importance of researching Spanish-speaking Hispanic consumers. Then the specific research questions that are investigated in this study will be presented, followed by the methods used to answer these questions. Finally, the results of this study will be presented and discussed.

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### THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCHING SPANISH-SPEAKING HISPANIC CONSUMERS

Three factors underscore the importance of investigating how well toll-free customer service telephone systems function for Spanish-speaking Hispanic consumers. We will discuss first the growing size and economic significance of the Hispanic market in the United States. We will then focus on the language preferences of Hispanic consumers. Finally, the lack of research devoted to this topic in the existing body of consumer satisfaction literature will be highlighted.

#### Size and Economic Significance of the Hispanic Market in the United States

The first reason why this research issue is important deals with the rapidly growing size and economic value of the Hispanic market. Due to their higher birth rates and immigration patterns, the number of Hispanics in the United States has increased dramatically. The Hispanic population grew from about 22.5 million in 1990 to about 27 million in 1995, which was about 10% of the total U.S. population (Hamstra 1996). If current projections are correct, there will be 31 million Hispanics in the U.S. by 2000 and 41.4 million by 2010, at which time Hispanics will outnumber African-Americans as the largest minority group in the United States (Hamstra 1996; Hitt 1998). Also, the number of Hispanic households is predicted to grow from 4.1 million in 1983 to over 9 million by 2000, more than double the expected increase for African-American households (Valdes and Seoane 1995).

Correspondingly, spending by Hispanics is playing an increasingly significant role in the United States economy. In terms of consumer expenditures, spending by Hispanics in the U.S. market is estimated to be \$348 billion in 1997, which represents a 66% increase from 1990 levels (Wynter 1997a). In comparative terms, African-American expenditures increased by 54% from 1990 to an estimated \$469 billion in 1997 (Wynter 1997a). As might be expected, many companies have recognized this growth in the Hispanic market and have attempted to develop marketing campaigns to appeal to this potentially lucrative

segment (Millman 1998; Petrozzello 1995; Wynter 1997b; Zbar 1995). According to *Hispanic Business* magazine, advertising spending in the Hispanic market exceeded \$1 billion in 1995 (Hamstra 1996). Therefore, because of the growing size and economic clout of Hispanic consumers in the United States, it is imperative to research how well companies' toll-free customer service lines function for them.

#### Language Preferences of Hispanics in the United States

A second reason why this study is potentially important relates to the language usage patterns and preferences of Hispanics in the United States. Valdes and Seoane (1995, pp. 12-13) assert:

Of all social traits, language is perhaps the most distinguishable characteristic of any culture, and probably the last one any immigrant group will give up. As has been documented extensively, given the choice, most first-generational U.S. Hispanic adults speak in Spanish rather than English, even if they are bilingual. Spanish-speaking language usage is sure to continue well into the future if current immigration projections hold.

According to the 1990 census, of the 6.8 million Spanish-speaking households in the United States, 1.6 million were classified into the census definition of "linguistically isolated", or Spanish-dominant households (Valdes and Seoane 1995). The 1990 census also classified 4.5 million Spanish speakers age 5 and over as "linguistically isolated" because they spoke English "not well" or "not at all" (Valdes and Seoane 1995). Also, a study by Strategy Research, using 1990 census numbers and door-to-door interviews nationwide with 4,800 Hispanics, determined that 81% of Hispanics are most comfortable speaking Spanish, while only 17% prefer English and 2% use both languages (Fisher 1994).

Research has further shown that preference for the Spanish language exists even among highly acculturated Hispanics. Strategy Research found that among Hispanic adults 18 or older in the United States, 19% are highly acculturated, while 47% are partially acculturated and 34% are

relatively unacculturated (Fisher 1994). But even among highly acculturated Hispanic adults, Spanish was the language of greatest comfort and the language spoken most often at home. Of the highly acculturated Hispanic adults, 53% were most comfortable speaking Spanish, while 41% preferred English and 6% used both.

Moreover, it does not appear that this use and preference for Spanish will decline in the near future. According to DRI/McGraw-Hill, the number of Hispanics over age 5 who speak Spanish in the home will grow from 15.3 million in 1990 to 21 million in 2000 and 26.7 million by 2010 (Fisher 1994).

Because these data indicate that many Hispanic consumers in the United States are not comfortable speaking English, this further supports the need to determine if companies' toll-free customer service lines can accommodate the needs of Spanish-speaking Hispanic consumers. If these customer service centers are not able to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking consumers, these consumers are likely to experience significantly higher levels of consumer dissatisfaction. In turn, their increased level of dissatisfaction is likely to generate long-term financial problems for those companies that do not have customer service systems that can receive and respond to these consumers' complaints.

### **Research Regarding Hispanic Consumer Satisfaction**

The third and final factor that highlights the need for this research is the relative paucity of prior attention to this topic. While the growing importance of the Hispanic market in the United States has generated a number of articles and research studies during the past two decades regarding Hispanic consumer behavior, virtually no prior research has concentrated on Hispanic consumers' use of toll-free customer service lines.

Early on in the development of Hispanic consumer behavior research, many practitioner-oriented articles sought to explain why marketers must address the unique needs and characteristics of Hispanic consumers (Astor 1981; Moya 1985; Segal and Sosa 1983; Valencia 1983). The general message of most of these articles was that marketers must recognize that Hispanic consumers

are indeed different from Anglo consumers along a number of dimensions, particularly their preference for promotional messages in Spanish rather than English. It appears that marketers who now attempt to reach the Hispanic market have accepted this message. In their survey of executives whose firms used advertising targeted at the Hispanic community, Albonetti and Dominguez (1989) found that the majority of these executives agreed that Spanish-language advertising is necessary for promoting to the Hispanic market in the United States.

The growing influence of the Hispanic market has also spawned a stream of academic research articles that have empirically investigated more thoroughly the nature of Hispanic consumer behavior. This research can be broadly divided into three major areas. First, some studies have concentrated on the shopping behavior of Hispanic consumers, particularly their degree of brand loyalty, as compared to non-Hispanic consumers (e.g., Mulhern and Williams 1994; Medina, Saegert, and Gresham 1996; Nicholls, Roslow, and Dublisch 1997; Saegert, Hoover, and Hilger 1985; Shim and Gehrt 1996; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983). Because Hispanics come from a variety of cultural backgrounds, a second group of studies has investigated potential differences in behavior among different categories of Hispanic consumers (e.g., Deshpande, Hoyer, and Donthu 1986; O'Guinn and Meyer 1983; Valencia 1989).

Finally, more pertinent to this study, a third set of research investigations has concentrated on Hispanic consumers' level of satisfaction with their purchases and their subsequent complaining behavior. In one of the earliest studies in this area, Villareal-Camacho (1983) reported that Mexican-Americans, as compared to Anglos, were less likely to complain and more likely to prefer exiting. In a more recent study, Diaz-Knauf, Schutz, and Almeida (1992) evaluated Hispanic consumers' satisfaction with a variety of categories of service providers. They found that Hispanic consumers were most satisfied with barbers/beauticians, health/fitness, dry cleaners, and appliance repair, and least satisfied with real estate, building contractors, and lawyers. Cornwell, Bligh, and Babakus (1991) investigated dissatisfied Mexican-American consumers' use of the Better Business Bureau. In contrast to national

complaint statistics for the Better Business Bureau, they discovered that far fewer complaints from Mexican-Americans focused on the area of unsatisfactory service. In an analysis of consumers' satisfaction with rainchecks as a solution to out-of-stock situations, Kelly, Huefner, and Hunt (1991) found that Hispanics, as compared to Whites, Blacks, and Orientals, were more satisfied with the use of rainchecks. Finally, Greene (1989) found that Hispanics who live in suburban communities are generally satisfied with their municipal services.

While these studies have added greatly to our understanding of Hispanic consumer behavior, the issue of Hispanic consumers' use of toll-free customer service numbers has received little research attention. The only prior research that attempted to address this issue was a national survey of toll-free customer service centers' activities and characteristics by the Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals (SOCAP 1992). This study reported that 32% of these centers have a bilingual representative. However, the significance of this finding is limited because SOCAP's survey included responses from companies in a broad variety of industries, many of which may not generate significant numbers of calls from Spanish-speaking consumers (e.g., "industrial products"). Also, SOCAP's research report did not specifically state if Spanish was the language that these "bilingual" representatives could speak. Most importantly, this study only asked if companies had bilingual representatives available. This study did not probe more deeply to consider how the entire toll-free customer service telephone system functions for consumers who do not speak English. For instance, if package instructions for calling a customer service number are written only in English, what is the likelihood that Spanish-speaking consumers will even be aware that this toll-free customer service number can be used to speak to a Spanish-speaking representative? Or, if Spanish-speaking consumers call a toll-free customer service number and are greeted by an automated service menu in English (i.e., "If you have a question about a product you bought, please press 2"), consumers may be unable to understand these instructions. Therefore, the question of how well toll-free customer service telephone systems serve the needs

of Spanish-speaking consumers remains unanswered.

In summary, the Hispanic market is a large, growing, and potentially lucrative market that more and more companies are endeavoring to target. However, the data clearly show that many Hispanic consumers are unable to speak and understand English. For this reason, it is vitally important to investigate how well the complaint management systems put in place in recent years by consumer products companies work for Hispanic consumers who are not fluent in English. If these consumers are not able to utilize the current customer service systems that most companies offer, this raises important questions that must be addressed. For instance, what potentially could companies do to modify their customer service telephone systems to provide better services for their Spanish-speaking customers? Also, if the current customer service telephone systems are not accessible for Spanish-speaking consumers, should governmental regulations be enacted to force companies to meet the needs of this segment of vulnerable consumers?

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The fundamental objective of this study is to understand more thoroughly how accessible toll-free customer service centers are for those Hispanic consumers who are unable to speak English. This question of accessibility involves more than just determining if Spanish-speaking customer service representatives are available in service centers. Therefore, this study will investigate the following three-step process that Spanish-speaking consumers must undertake to express their complaints to customer service representatives.

**Customer service information on product packaging.** The first step in this process involves consumers becoming aware of the existence of toll-free customer service centers maintained by companies. Obviously, if consumers are not aware that companies provide toll-free customer service telephone lines for their use, they will not use them to communicate their complaints or questions. The following two questions address this issue of consumer awareness:

- 1) Do products list on their packaging a toll-free customer service number that customers may call if they have questions or complaints?
- 2) If products list a customer service phone number on their packaging, which language is used to communicate this information to consumers?

**Service center processing of customers' calls.** The second step in this process deals with how consumers' calls to toll-free customer service centers are processed and routed before consumers actually speak with service representatives. If Spanish-speaking consumers call these service centers and find that they are instructed in English to wait on hold or to select a certain service option from an automated service menu, they may become discouraged and abandon their attempts to contact a service representative. The next four questions focus on this issue:

- 3) When consumers call toll-free service centers, how often are their calls placed on hold?
- 4) If customers' calls to service centers are placed on hold, which language is used to instruct callers about this holding process?
- 5) When consumers call toll-free service centers, how often are they asked to use an automated service menu to route their call?
- 6) If customers receive an automated service menu when they call toll-free customer service centers, which language is used to explain to callers this routing and selection process?

**Spanish-language services available at service centers.** The third and final step in this process involves actual communication interactions that take place between consumers and service representatives. When Spanish-speaking consumers call toll-free customer service centers, it would be easier for them to communicate their complaints or questions if they are able to speak with service representatives who are fluent in Spanish. The final question in this study addresses this point:

- 7) What percent of toll-free customer service centers have Spanish-speaking service representatives on staff to meet the language needs of Spanish-speaking consumers who call?

## METHODOLOGY

In this section, we will describe our choice of research setting, sampling procedures, and data collection process for this study.

### Choice of Research Setting

We chose to focus on those products which Hispanic consumers typically purchase in grocery stores. While toll-free customer service numbers are now used by companies in a wide variety of industries (Garrett and Meyers 1996; Martin and Smart 1994; SOCAP 1992), products sold in grocery stores were specifically selected for analysis in this study for two primary reasons. First, a number of studies have shown that, compared to other groups of consumers, Hispanics spend a comparatively larger portion of their income on food items (Astor 1981; Fisher 1990; Segal and Sosa 1983; Valdes and Seoane 1995; Vargas 1997). According to a 1995 survey by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Hispanics spend an average of \$3,370 annually on food for consumption at home, compared to \$2,803 for whites and \$2,367 for blacks (Vargas 1997). Because these products represent a relatively larger portion of Hispanics' budgets, a correspondingly larger proportion of Hispanics' questions and complaints are likely to focus on these same types of products.

Second, in addition to the traditional allotment of basic fresh and canned food products, most modern grocery stores now carry a broad assortment of other consumer products such as toiletries, pet supplies, laundry care products, and household cleaning products. Therefore, by selecting products from a modern full-line grocery store, a variety of the products that consumers use in their daily lives will be included in this study.

### Sampling Procedures

Products were purchased from a full-line

grocery store in a large Midwestern city that is the home of over 40,000 Hispanics. This particular store was selected because it is located in a predominantly Hispanic section of this city as determined from local census data. The store, which is relatively new, attempts to cater to the local Hispanic population by posting most signs in both English and Spanish in the store. This store's commitment to the local Hispanic population is also evident because most of the service personnel are fluent in both English and Spanish. Previous research also shows that, contrary to the stereotype of Hispanics shopping mainly at local "Mom and Pop" grocery stores, Hispanics prefer to buy their groceries from large, full-line grocery stores such as the store selected for this study (Murphy 1997).

Two members of the research team randomly selected 145 products from the shelves of this store. All products in the store were eligible for selection except for those products in the frozen foods, fresh produce and fresh meat sections. These categories were excluded because the research team lacked facilities to properly store these products and prevent spoilage during the course of the research process. Also, these categories were excluded because many products in these sections typically do not have packaging that carries customer service information (e.g., bananas, packages of ground beef).

The 145 products that were selected came from the following product categories:

- 87: Food products
- 25: Personal care products (e.g., toiletries, cosmetics, medical care)
- 14: Household paper and plastic products (e.g., napkins, storage dishes)
- 10: Cleaning products (e.g., laundry soap, bathroom cleaners)
- 9: Pet care products (e.g., pet food, pet toys)

#### **Data Collection Process**

Each of the 145 products was first inspected to determine if a toll-free telephone number was listed on the product's packaging that customers could use to call the company if they had questions or complaints. If a toll-free telephone number was listed, the language used to convey this information on the package was noted. Then, if a

toll-free customer service number was listed, one member of the research team attempted to call this number. This researcher is a native of a South American country and is fluent in both Spanish, his native language, and English. When he placed these calls, the researcher recorded whether his calls were placed on hold and whether he was asked to use an automated service menu. He also noted the language that was used to explain to callers the holding process and automated service menus at these companies.

Up to three attempts were made to contact companies that listed a toll-free customer service number on their product packaging. When a customer service representative answered the call, the interviewer explained that the purpose of this call was to collect information regarding toll-free customer service numbers provided by companies for their customers. The interviewer explained that all responses obtained in this interview would be confidential and the company's name would not be included in subsequent reports. If the service representative agreed to participate, the interviewer first asked if the service center had Spanish-speaking customer service representatives available who could speak with Spanish-speaking consumers. The interviewer also asked the respondent how many calls the service center received per month from Spanish-speaking consumers regarding this particular product.

## **RESULTS**

In this section the results obtained in this study will be reported in the three major areas being investigated: customer service information on product packaging, call processing of customer calls to toll-free service centers, and Spanish-language services available at toll-free customer service centers.

#### **Customer Service Information on Product Packaging**

The packaging of the 145 products selected for analysis in this study was examined to determine if consumers were provided with information regarding how to contact the companies if they had questions or complaints. This examination revealed:

- 71 products (49%) listed a toll-free customer service number.
- 74 products (51%) did not list a toll-free customer service number.

Next, the products were examined to determine the language that was used to instruct consumers on how to contact companies if they had questions or complaints. For those 71 products that provided information to consumers on how to call the company:

- 71 products (100%) provided information regarding toll-free customer service centers only in English.
- 0 products (0%) provided information regarding toll-free customer service centers in Spanish.

#### **Call Processing of Customer Calls to Toll-Free Service Centers**

When attempts were made to call the 71 companies that listed a toll-free customer service number on their packages, data were collected on the steps the caller must go through to make contact with a customer service representative. Of the 71 companies that were contacted:

- 60 companies (85%) did not place the caller on hold.
- 11 companies (15%) placed the caller on hold.

The researcher making the calls also noted the language that was used by these 11 companies to explain to consumers that their call was being placed on hold:

- 11 companies (100%) used English only for holding instructions.
- 0 companies (0%) offered Spanish language-holding instructions.

Automated service menus are an increasingly familiar mechanism by which companies attempt to more efficiently route consumers' calls to the most appropriate option (Grimm and Ward 1997). Of the 71 companies that were called:

- 41 companies (58%) presented the caller with an automated service menu.
- 30 companies (42%) did not present the caller with an automated service menu.

Once again, the researcher noted the language used by these 41 companies to explain to consumers how to use the automated service menu to route their calls to the most appropriate destination in the company:

- 41 companies (100%) used only English to explain their automated service menu to callers.
- 0 companies (0%) offered instructions for using their automated service menu in Spanish.

#### **Spanish Language Services Available at Toll-Free Customer Service Centers**

Next, attempts were made to determine if Spanish-language services were available at these 71 companies that provided toll-free telephone numbers for their consumers to call. To collect this information, it was necessary to speak directly with a member of the customer service center at each of these companies. Interviews were eventually completed at 62 of the 71 companies (87%). Interviews were not completed with the remaining nine companies (13%) because either the interviewer could not obtain an answer to his calls to the company or customer service personnel declined to participate in this study.

Of these 62 companies with whom interviews were completed:

- 7 companies (11%) reported that they did not have any ability to properly handle calls from Spanish-speaking consumers.
- 38 companies (61%) reported that they had at least one Spanish-speaking customer service representative on their "in-house" staff that could communicate directly with Spanish-speaking callers.
- 13 companies (21%) indicated that they utilized the services of an outside translation service to communicate with Spanish-speaking callers rather than having their own Spanish-speaking customer service representatives.

- 2 companies (3%) provided a system in which service representatives, once they recognized that callers preferred to speak Spanish, would play a recording in Spanish that directed consumers to leave a message so that a Spanish-speaking representative of the company could later call them back.
- 2 companies (3%) claimed they had the ability to properly handle calls from Spanish-speaking consumers but they declined to explain exactly the mechanism they used.

Before the results of this study are discussed, potential research limitations will be presented in the next section.

### RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

There are a couple of limitations that must be weighed as the results of this study are interpreted. First, the focus of this study was limited to consumer products that are typically purchased from full-line grocery stores. Therefore, no conclusions can be drawn regarding the performance of customer service centers for other categories of consumer products, most notably consumer durables such as appliances, automobiles, and electronics products.

Second, products were selected from just one grocery store in one large Midwestern city. Therefore, the results from this study may not be generalizable to other grocery stores and other cities. However, given the national marketing and distribution patterns for many consumer products sold in grocery stores, the products selected for analysis in this study are probably quite similar to the products bought by Hispanics in other cities.

### DISCUSSION

This section will first discuss how accessible customer service centers are for Spanish-speaking consumers. Next, discussion will focus on the implications of these findings for consumer affairs managers. Finally, the public policy issues related to the data found in this study will be addressed.

### The Accessibility of Customer Service Centers for Spanish-Speaking Consumers

The overall objective of this study was to determine how well toll-free customer service centers developed by consumer products companies function for Spanish-speaking Hispanic consumers. The results found in this study present some contradictory evidence. On the one hand, the finding that 61% of those companies with toll-free customer service centers had Spanish-speaking service representatives on staff is promising. By itself, this suggests that perhaps the large number of Hispanic consumers who are not fluent in English may indeed be able to receive help from companies when they have questions or complaints regarding their purchases.

However, on the other hand, when the full process that Spanish-speaking consumers must undertake to receive service is evaluated, a far less positive picture emerges. As the results in this study clearly show, Spanish-speaking consumers must vault over several formidable barriers before they can even have the opportunity to speak with Spanish-language service representatives at these companies. First, because all of products in this study had directions on their packages regarding how to use their toll-free customer service numbers written only in English, it is doubtful if Spanish-speaking consumers would even understand that they should utilize these services when they have questions or problems. Second, even if they are aware that they can call these numbers to receive service, many Spanish-speaking consumers may be discouraged from actually continuing with this process when they are instructed in English to wait on hold or to use an automated service menu to route their call. The results in this study show that the use of holding instructions and automated service directions is a fairly common occurrence that could dissuade Spanish-speaking consumers from utilizing the services that may be available to them.

The seriousness of these obstacles for Spanish-speaking consumers is reinforced from additional information collected in this study. The interviewer also asked respondents to indicate the number or percent of calls from Spanish-speaking consumers received by their customer service centers. Respondents found it very difficult to



state a precise number or percentage, but they uniformly responded that they received "very few" calls from Spanish-speaking consumers. Given the obstacles Spanish-speaking consumers face, this low level of use of Spanish-language services in customer service centers is not surprising. Unfortunately, therefore, the results of this study support Andreasen and Manning's (1990) contention that Hispanic consumers may be vulnerable consumers who are not able to receive the same level of customer service afforded to other consumers in the United States market.

### **Implications for Consumer Affairs Managers**

The data from this study should raise a warning flag for consumer affairs managers in the corporate world. There are abundant data, as presented earlier in this article, that clearly show that the Hispanic market is growing rapidly and many of these Hispanic consumers are uncomfortable speaking English. It appears that as many companies rush to market their products to this increasingly attractive Hispanic market, their customer service centers are not providing adequate support for these efforts. While many companies have service representatives who are fluent in Spanish, they have apparently neglected to analyze the entire process that these Spanish-language consumers must undertake to utilize fully these services. It is little wonder then that these customer service centers receive very few calls from Spanish-speaking consumers.

Without an adequate customer service telephone system in place for their Spanish-speaking consumers, consumer affairs managers run the considerable risk of failing to respond effectively to these consumers' questions and complaints. If dissatisfied Spanish-speaking consumers are unaware that they could call these toll-free customer service numbers and speak with a Spanish-speaking service representative, they are likely to engage in behaviors (i.e., negative word-of-mouth communication, switching to competitors' products) that have a detrimental impact on these companies. Therefore, the data in this study strongly indicate that this is a problem area that consumer affairs managers should remedy in order to better serve an important segment of their customers and thereby also benefit the

financial performance of their companies.

To encourage their Spanish-speaking consumers to communicate their questions or complaints to representatives in their service centers, consumer affairs managers should consider implementing a separate toll-free customer service number specifically targeted for use by Spanish-speaking consumers. On their product packages, companies could then list two separate toll-free customer service numbers, one for English-speaking consumers and another different number for Spanish-speaking consumers. Explicit directions should be written in Spanish on the packaging to encourage consumers to call this number if they have problems with the product and they would like to speak with a service representative who is fluent in Spanish. In addition, on this Spanish-language service line companies could also record directions in Spanish explaining to consumers how to wait on hold and how to use an automated service menu to route their calls. This approach, which should not be very expensive to implement, could greatly alleviate the problems that many Spanish-speaking consumers face when they attempt to use the customer service systems currently in place.

### **Public Policy Implications**

From a strictly self-serving economic perspective, consumer affairs managers should be motivated to provide a better customer service telephone system for their Spanish-speaking consumers. However, if consumer affairs managers of companies are unwilling to respond positively to the needs of Spanish-speaking consumers, what role should the government play in encouraging or mandating appropriate corporate changes? Interestingly, this is an issue that is currently being addressed in a larger public policy context in the United States.

According to the 1990 U.S. Census, there are 323 different languages currently spoken in the United States (Mujica 1996). The 1990 Census also revealed that more than 31.8 million people in the United States speak a language other than English, which is a significant increase over the 23.1 million non-English speakers reported in the 1980 Census (Parlman and Shoeman 1994). In response to this increased use of languages other

than English, a movement has been launched in recent years to mandate the establishment of English as the official language of the United States (Lee 1997; Ojito 1997). Thus far, 23 states and a multitude of municipalities have passed laws declaring English to be the official language (Ojito 1997). In general, these laws require legislators to take the necessary steps to ensure that the role of English is preserved and enhanced (Parlman and Shoeman 1994).

Opinion polls show that these efforts to establish English as the official language have broad support. A Gallup poll found that 82 percent of respondents support English as the official language of the United States (O'Beirne 1996). At the same time, many employers in the United States have begun to require their foreign-born employees to converse only in English and not in their native languages (Ojito 1997; Parlman and Shoeman 1994). Unfortunately, some employers have taken this requirement to extremes by prohibiting their employees from speaking their native languages when they are on breaks, using the restrooms, or even walking outside the office buildings. As a result, advocacy groups are receiving record numbers of complaints from foreign-born workers regarding language discrimination in the workplace (Ojito 1997).

Against this backdrop, this question must then be raised "Should government require companies to provide better consumer service systems for their Spanish-speaking customers?" Proponents of stronger governmental mandates in this regard can readily point to the growing numbers of Spanish-speaking consumers in the United States. They may also draw upon the results of this study and argue that Spanish-speaking consumers are not currently served very well by the toll-free customer service systems that have been established thus far by consumer products companies.

However, from a pragmatic perspective, it appears that the time may not be ripe to consider the spawning of new governmental guidelines to rectify this defective customer service system for the benefit of Spanish-speaking consumers. Instead, the emergence and broad support for English-only laws indicates that the general public in the United States believes that residents in the United States who do not speak English should be

encouraged to learn to speak English. There is strong sentiment that immigrants should not be provided with additional support systems that allow them to continue to function in American society by communicating only in their native language. Thus, it is doubtful if regulations or legislation at the state or national level mandating better corporate customer service systems for Spanish-speaking consumers would receive much support.

## CONCLUSION

The results from this study reveal that the toll-free customer service telephone systems currently used by consumer products companies do not address very well the needs of Spanish-speaking consumers. Even though many companies have Spanish-speaking representatives in their service centers, it is extremely doubtful that Spanish-speaking consumers could actually reach them to express their complaints and questions. A number of significant obstacles stand in the way of Spanish-speaking consumers. Most importantly, instructions on packages regarding the existence and use of toll-free customer service lines are written only in English, not in Spanish. Also, even if Spanish-speaking consumers do call these numbers, they are often directed in English to remain on hold for a service representative or to select a specific telephone button to direct their call to the proper destination.

Because of these obstacles, very few Spanish-speaking consumers currently call toll-free customer service centers. As a result, consumer affairs managers are not able to address the complaints and questions generated by this growing body of consumers in the United States. From a strictly economic perspective, consumer affairs managers should be motivated to correct this flaw in their current system so that they can more effectively meet the needs of this increasingly attractive market of Spanish-speaking consumers.

To rectify this weakness, consumer affairs managers should seriously consider adding separate toll-free customer service lines that are dedicated to Spanish-speaking consumers and staffed exclusively by Spanish-speaking service representatives. Consumer affairs managers should also provide information written in Spanish

on their products' packaging to encourage Spanish-speaking consumers to utilize this service. This new service option should remove most of the obstacles in the current system and thereby greatly increase the numbers of Spanish-speaking consumers who contact companies with their complaints and questions.

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