

# Love of Language Leads Enterprising Agent into Successful Niche Market

By Stephanie K. Jones

At first glance, Kathryn Soderberg would seem an unlikely candidate for an insurance agent whose expertise in marketing to Hispanic customers lands her gigs on radio talk shows and leading Hispanic market training sessions for large insurance companies. Soderberg, president of Soderberg Insurance Services Inc.

in Lynnfield, Mass., a Boston suburb, describes herself as being tall, fair and Northern European looking. Yet the amount of business her agency derives from the Spanish speaking community is 25 percent and growing.

Soderberg couldn't be happier about that. In fact, she gives her Spanish speaking customers a lot of credit for helping her agency ride out the current soft market and economic downturn.

"We're affected by the slow down like other folks," Soderberg said, "but I think it would be more dramatic if we didn't have the credibility and we weren't as established as we are now in the Hispanic community."

It wasn't always that way. Twenty-five years ago, none of her family owned agency's business was derived from that community. But a fateful encounter during a voter registration drive at the local town hall changed all that.

To digress, Soderberg is fluent in Spanish. She holds undergraduate degrees in Spanish and English, and a Master's degree in Spanish. She has studied in Mexico and Spain, and has taught Spanish at the gradu-

ate level. During the above mentioned voter registration event, Soderberg was paired with a representative from a different political party; they would each verify the registration documents the other handled. The person with whom Soderberg was paired "was a really cute, fun lady from Guatemala. We hit it off immediately and were rattling off in Spanish. ... It started really with her, this woman named Rosalina," she said.

When they met, Rosalina was selling home products but she eventually started selling real estate, and when she sold a house she would refer her clients to Soderberg for insurance. "I realized that, 'wow if I have five people like Rosalina that sell houses and refer their clients to us, that's such great business,'" Soderberg said. "So I started working on these centers of influence, like real estate agents and a lot of times mortgage people. ... Because Hispanics are still buying properties and businesses fervently, I realized I needed to concentrate on these centers of influence that work with the Hispanic community."

One of the best things about it, according to Soderberg, is that the agency's focus on the Hispanic community has allowed her to "marry the love of languages with our family business. That's kind of what led me into the niche marketing." Still, Soderberg said, an agency doesn't necessarily need "to be fluent in Swahili or Spanish or Korean to make that niche marketing successful, but it certainly helps."

The majority of Soderberg's Hispanic clients have roots in Central America, but South America is also well represented. Most of that business comes into the agency through referrals, Soderberg said. "We're kind of in an upper middle class bedroom community, of all single family homes. It's not an urban setting, so I think the fact that we've had that kind of penetration in the marketplace is pretty remarkable," Soderberg said.

## A Personal Connection

There is a different kind of personal connection that occurs when providing service to Hispanic cultures, Soderberg said. While Anglos typically will use the phone or Internet to conduct business, Hispanic clients more often want to "sit down face to face and talk to the person who's helping them out. It's kind of part of that culture."

One thing to be aware of when working with Spanish speakers are the cultural differences between various nationalities, Soderberg says. "There's a big difference, culturally, in someone from El Salvador, from someone from Peru, versus someone from Argentina, versus someone from Mexico. We have to be very sensitive to the differences between these nationalities. It's like the United Nations here."

But those differences and the need for sensitivity make her office an interesting place to work, Soderberg said. "I think everybody's learned a lot from working with dif-



Kathryn Soderberg

**'You don't need someone who speaks perfectly good Spanish, but you have to have people that have the right attitude.'**



Douglas Soderberg, with Alejandro Gomez and Claudia Dias, owners of Los Paisanos Market.

ferent cultures. It's really beautiful, actually. What has inspired me is the gratitude. When you work with people who are not from this area and they find a company or an individual that really treats them with respect and gives them what they need, it's not only

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