

# Vital reasons to say it in Spanish

Many immigrants find language key to business

By PURVA PATEL

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Khen Vu Ly and his wife, Anna, try to speak Spanish every day to their customers and employees at Kim Hung Supermarket in Houston's old Chinatown.

They're learning Spanish, they say, because they need it to help their business flourish.

Spanish-speaking employees understand them better, and customers feel more welcome.

The Asian store is attracting a growing number of Hispanic shoppers with its supply of fresh seafood and meats.

"Right now we speak Spanish more than any other language in the store because before we had an Asian population here, but it's moved to the south and more Hispanics come and shop here now," Khen Vu Ly, 46, said.

Though there's often a push for immigrants to learn English, the growing Hispanic population is prompting many immigrants in Houston to focus equally, if not more, on their Spanish.

The changing demographics of their customers and employees make knowing Spanish a must for many immigrant business owners who often thought English would be the only new language they would have to learn.

"This is extremely common," said Betsy Gelb, a marketing professor at the University of Houston.

"What we teach is you need to be market-oriented to be successful, but how can you even find out what your customers want if you can't communicate with them? It's the first step to being market-oriented, and sometimes that means learning another language."

When Ly noticed an increase in customers who weren't speaking English, he and his wife started asking employees for mini-lessons.

The couple also reviews a textbook at home to pick up conversational phrases.

"When the customer understands, I get excited because they're very happy to see an Asian speak to them in Spanish," Ly said.

## English First

Raul Gonzales of Gonzales School of Languages said he's seeing more and more non-English-speaking Houstonians opting to learn Spanish before English.

In fact, he said, the foreign-born, many of whom are business people, often outnumber the American students in the school's Spanish classes.

"A lot of them can barely speak English, but they want to learn Spanish," he said.

"Americans aren't always quick to learn another language because Americans tend to think everyone should know English. I think so, too, but Spanish can't be denied."

Nitin Patel, 44, is quick to admit his Spanish is probably better than his English.

He's been teaching himself Spanish since the early 1990s by watching telenovelas and conversing with the housekeeping staff at the motel he manages on Bissonet.

He moved to Houston in 1991 and the following year hired a housekeeper who spoke only Spanish.

He'd ask her how to say things such as "pillow" and "linen" and slowly built his vocabulary.

When he started working nights, he'd watch telenovelas and pick up more.

"If I want to give my employees work, it's so much easier when I know Spanish," he said in his native Gujarati. "And customers like it a

lot. There are so many who can't speak English, so they like it when we speak Spanish. Sometimes they wonder where I'm from.

"They don't believe I'm from India because my Spanish is so good."

So many Gujarati-speaking immigrants own and manage hotels that the MultiCultural Foodservice & Hospitality Alliance distributes a Gujarati-to-Spanish translation guide with common phrases.

Patel said he's also trying to pick up some Chinese or Vietnamese but hasn't had as many opportunities to practice it.

## It's A Must

Carmelo Mauro, owner of the Italian restaurant that bears his name, said he's always tried to learn as many languages as he could because it's a must in the hospitality industry.

"When they go into a foreign country, they want to be welcomed in their own native language and be served and pampered," said Mauro, 59, a native Italian.

"When I realized the influence of the Spanish language locally, I started learning it. We are getting more and more into a glob-

al economy, especially in west Houston, where we are in the Energy Corridor."

Many of his customers do business in Central and South America.

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**—Carmelo Mauro**

And he likes to greet and converse with diners at Carmelo's in their native language to help them feel at home, he said, adding that if they enjoy themselves they're likely to return.

Mauro bought books, listened to tapes and spoke with Spanish-speaking employees to brush up on his Spanish.

"With the people that work with me here — instead of them talking to me in English, I was talking to them in Spanish. That helps on a daily basis. You get lessons, and it doesn't cost much," he said.

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