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## DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY

# 'It goes beyond just translating': How bank products become bilingual

By [Miriam Cross](#) July 05, 2023, 3:55 p.m. EDT 7 Min Read



Square converted its entire ecosystem of software, hardware and payment solutions for merchants to be available in both Spanish and English last year, including commerce tools, banking and loans. *Square*

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language.

Pew Research Center reported that the U.S. Hispanic population reached 62.5 million in 2021, up 19% from 2010. Hispanics accounted for 52% of the U.S.'s population growth in that same period, which Pew found to be a greater share than any other racial or ethnic group. Almost one in five people in the U.S. spoke [a language other than English](#) at home as of 2019, with Spanish being the most common, at 62% of this group, according to Census Bureau data from the end of 2022.

"It is a missing part when you think [about the fact] that there is a large segment in the market and no one is targeting it very efficiently," said Rutger van Faassen, head of market strategy at financial services consulting firm Curinos.

Holly Frindell, chief program officer for the National Association for Latino Community Asset Builders, has seen some [credit unions](#) engage in outreach, such as by creating educational videos in Spanish. NALCAB also consulted with Capital One Financial on its consumer education site for this market, called, Listos, Clic, Avance (or Ready, Set, Bank) that is not specific to Capital One (its logo appears at the bottom). She has seen a variety of [fintech apps](#) target this population, such as investment app Finhabits and budgeting app Mobills. Community development financial institutions may offer their ecosystems in Spanish.

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Outreach is important because "Newcomers to the U.S. may either have unfamiliarity with the U.S. financial system or distrust of financial institutions in general," said Frindell.

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"I've seen a lot of [places] that have an information page in Spanish, but once you go to the actual product or try to log into your account, it's in English," said Sharon García, director of communications at NALCAB.



## BRANCH BANKING

### Spanish speakers said to encounter barriers at bank branches

Earlier this year, canvassers visited branches in five California counties to ask about account options. Some 37% of those who spoke Spanish were unable to talk to a banker, compared with 15% of English speakers, according to a report by the Roosevelt Institute.

By Kevin Wack

September 8

The painstaking process of duplicating banking services and features in English and Spanish requires both a technical lift that goes beyond mounting a Google Translate button in the corner of the screen, and human intervention to navigate complexities such as legal terminology and reconciling nuances in different dialects. It also requires hiring customer support staff who can speak the language.



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underbanked, decided to make the totality of the experience bilingual. The single product and delivery channel was a luxury.

"At USAlliance [the credit union that originally conceived of Dora], we aspired to have a Spanish offering. But when you start to think about the complexity of that project, it's quite overwhelming," said Kristi Kenworthy, the managing director of Dora and previously the assistant vice president of e-commerce at USAlliance. "You have a myriad of products and services. Layer on top of that all the extra things like car warranties, life insurance and free monthly credit scores. Then think about all the delivery channels that a traditional credit union has: online banking, mobile banking, branches, ATMs, the call center, fraud departments. Think of all the people generating emails on your behalf."

The planning process involved mapping out every user experience and user journey the team behind Dora could think of, from the ways users might contact customer service, to the vendors who produce their monthly statements, to [disclosures](#), text messages and mailers. A portion of the translation was done via automated translation services, but everything was reviewed for quality control by Spanish speakers before the app went to market. That revealed subtleties that the team had missed, such as pop-up messages.

Dora will automatically launch in Spanish if the user's smartphone settings are oriented to Spanish when they download the app. If not, the app will prompt the user to choose their preferred language. Currently, 20% of Dora users opt for Spanish.

"There are a lot of moving pieces," said Kenworthy. "You have to build everything twice." That trickled all the way down to out-of-office messages. When Kenworthy was on vacation and a colleague received her English-language auto response, they realized that should be bilingual as well.

Another financial services provider making a similar effort is Square. In September 2022, Square, a unit of Block, announced that its entire ecosystem of software, hardware and payment solutions for merchants would be available in Spanish as well as English. This includes commerce tools, banking

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"It was not just the right thing to do in a country where Spanish is so widely spoken, but it makes a lot of good business sense," said Jerónimo Anaya Ortiz, the Spanish language communications lead at Square. He points to data from the Small Business Administration that one in four new businesses is Hispanic-owned. The businesses that might benefit the most are themselves somewhat bilingual — say, a restaurant where the front-of-house runs in English while the back-of-house staff primarily speak Spanish.

One challenge was finding what Anaya Ortiz describes as ES-US Spanish, or a 'neutral' form of Spanish that does not contain cultural terminology or terms that are specific to a region or country.

"It goes beyond just translating," he said. "With Spanish there are a lot of nuances. The beauty of the American Hispanic community is it's a melting pot."

The project involved translating all content related to more than 30 individual products, as well as thousands of web pages, blog posts, business resources, and testimonials, to Spanish. The company hired dedicated Spanish-speaking employees across teams such as customer success, communications, sales, and account management. Square's globalization team led the technical effort of translating all necessary materials into U.S. Spanish; it has also led translations of Square products and services into Catalan in Spain and French in Canada.

"Their job is to ensure that our offerings are not only translated into the desired language, but also use culturally competent language to ensure we are locally relevant," said Rodrigo Martinez, international payment operations manager at Square.

U.S. Bancorp in Minneapolis has already converted several of its own products.

In April 2022, the \$682 billion-asset bank debuted a Spanish version of its voice-enabled Smart Assistant in its mobile app, or Asistente Inteligente de U.S. Bank. The mobile app had already been

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About six months prior to its launch, "We attempted to do some quick and dirty tech solutions and some initial proof of concept," said Richard Weeks, head of conversational experiences at U.S. Bank.

But when native Spanish speakers on staff pointed out misinterpretations and blends of formal and informal responses in some scripts, "We quickly identified that it wasn't going to be good enough," Weeks said.

The project team, which included the user experience group, developers, the business resource group and more, included native Spanish speakers. The bank uses automated speech recognition software already available on devices to initially convert speech into text. It also deployed "our own internal secret sauce to understand the customer's preference and ensure the information we are presenting back has been fully vetted by our translation protocols internally and is thoroughly reviewed by our Spanish compliance department to ensure accuracy and consistency, and that it matches the same information we provide within English," said Weeks.

He has noticed that many English speakers use one- to two-word search terms, while Spanish-speaking customers tend to speak in fuller sentences, "which is very helpful when trying to provide an accurate answer," he said. More than 40% of U.S. Bank's Spanish-preferring customers have used the virtual assistant.

Anecdotally, "our Spanish-speaking customers are thrilled," said Weeks.

Online banking is also available in both languages at U.S. Bank. The company says it is expanding its Spanish-language presence on the U.S. Bank website, with some product pages to be available in Spanish by the end of the year.

Frindell finds that one of the most effective forms of outreach for financial services in these communities is word of mouth.

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**Miriam Cross** Tech Reporter, Arizent    

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