

TOOLBOX

BOOKS



The Nature of Marketing: Marketing to the Swarm as Well as the Herd

By Chuck Brymer

It seems that every six months or so, a new Internet trend crops up. It started off with blogs, then it was MySpace, then Facebook, now Twitter is the hot item.

The emergence of social networks and user-generated Web 2.0 applications creates uncharted territory for today's marketer, says Chuck Brymer, author of "The Nature of Marketing."

Brymer describes effective ways of directing your advertising toward "the swarm," a mass of people with no discernible leader who receive their information from diverse sources, i.e. the Internet crowd. Unlike the old "herd" paradigm, information travels lightning-fast through blogs and social networking sites. With no center for culture or news, trends and ideas pop up seemingly out of nowhere.

Brymer, who is president and CEO of ad agency DBB, explains how you can tap into this new digital medium and create your brand's own Internet buzz. Brymer breaks his method down into three laws of engaging a community: conviction — above all the swarm is looking for authenticity; collaboration — the digital community

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Cristina Didoné of CD Language Solutions: Diversified her client base after learning that putting all her eggs in one basket was a bad idea.

CRAIG H. HARTLEY/HBJ

Grit and determination helped Cristina Didoné bring her language translation firm back from the brink

BY CASEY WOOTEN
HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

The English language offers a host of synonyms for the word "perseverance." Texans have a particular affection for terms such as "grit," "quittin'" and "hunkering down."

Traveling from her native Argentina by way of Kansas City, Cristina Didoné, founder of CD Language Solutions, caught on quickly to that never-say-die Texas ethos. Her Houston-based translation firm bounced back from a near collapse in 2001, posting a 50 percent annual growth rate since 2004 and bringing in \$1.8 million in revenue in 2007 and \$2.9 million in 2008.

Although Didoné may not see many Texans in her line of work, her international background makes her a natural for juggling reams of multilingual corporate texts. After

receiving a master's degree in translation from Buenos Aires University, she immigrated to the United States, teaching at a Kansas City magnet school.

Her dream, however, was to become a legal translator. Didoné took a job as a federal court interpreter and quickly realized the high demand for qualified workers. Soon she founded Kansas City Translations, training and hiring out interpreters.

Didoné grew her Kansas City business for nine years before selling it and moving to Houston.

"I decided to pursue a more diversified clientele," Didoné says. "(Also) I moved to Houston to get an executive MBA at Rice."

It was while in Rice University's MBA program that she started building contacts with companies like Shell Oil Co. and then-energy trading giant Enron Corp. Didoné estab-

lished her new Houston-based translation service, CD Language Solutions, in 1998 with the proceeds from the sale of her Kansas City company. Enron and energy company The Coastal Corp. — both of which had extensive operations in Central America — were her primary clients starting out.

"We were very fortunate because Enron had, at the time, a large international operation," Didoné says. "In 1999, 80 percent of the revenue we had came from Enron."

CD Language Solutions closed its first year of business with \$1 million in sales and had grown from two to eight employees with around 200 freelance translators. The company capped off the decade with a 16-language translation project for the merger of oil giants Exxon Oil Co. and Mobil Oil.

But then came Enron's headline-grabbing,

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LANGUAGE: Diverse client base has helped company weather current economic storm

FROM PAGE 15A

pension-draining collapse. Within a couple of weeks, 80 percent of Didoné's income had evaporated.

"I had to lay off all my employees," Didoné says. "Translators had to get paid for their work still, but there was hardly any income."

Then came the second calamity — Didoné's other big client, The Coastal Corp. was bought out by El Paso Corp. in 2002.

"We practically had no clients left," Didoné says.

With the company in dire financial straits — not to mention two newborn babies at home — Didoné had to restructure CD Language Solutions and find new clients. She had put too much faith in too few clients, and ultimately paid the price. Having to rebuild her company from essentially nothing, she promised herself that this time around she would do things differently.

"I learned my lesson," Didoné says. "Never put all your eggs in one basket. I went out and diversified my client base."

Didoné still sought energy clients, signing contracts with Halliburton Co., Schlumberger Ltd. and Duke Energy Corp., but she also searched for clients in health care and law. CD Language now works with major law firms such as Vinson & Elkins LLP, Haynes and Boone LLP and King & Spalding LLP.

Although Enron's demise wrecked her business in the short term, the relationships she built with the company's employees remained. When those former Enron employees found jobs elsewhere in Houston, they didn't forget Didoné.

"We have been fortunate that when clients take lateral moves in the industry, they always take our name," Didoné says. "We work with at least 30 clients that used to work with Enron."

By the end of 2002, CD Language was up and running again. Didoné had tracked down new clients, rehired staff and moved her office from its Greenway Plaza location to the Energy Corridor to cut costs.

Diversifying the company's client base has helped Didoné weather the current economic storm as well. Despite the recent ups and downs of the legal industry, the high number of legal clients CD Language services means work is always coming in. Health care has avoided much of the recent economic troubles and is noted as being one of the few industries with positive job growth.

"I really don't take roadblocks as problems or obstacles, those are challenges, and there is always a way to overcome them," Didoné says. "When times were difficult, people would ask me if I was closing my business. I said absolutely not."

That same ethic goes into her hiring decisions.

"Every employee must have that philosophy as well," Didoné says.

Finding top talent is the key to building a successful business in her industry, Didoné says. The most valuable are experts in certain fields, for example legal, health care or oil and gas.

Today, CD Language has 10 employees and more than 400 freelance trans-



CD LANGUAGE SOLUTIONS

BUSINESS: Language Translation Services

FOUNDED: 2001

TOP EXECUTIVE: Cristina Didoné, founder and president.

EMPLOYEES: 10

REVENUE:

2007: \$1.8 million

2008: \$2.9 million

WEB SITE: www.cdlanguage.com

lators and works in more than 100 languages.

Steven Marzuola, president of the Houston Interpreters and Translators Association, agrees that becoming a successful translator means developing multiple niche skills.

"The ones that are doing well now are medical interpreters," Marzuola says. "When a patient shows up and has limited English proficiency, (the hospital) needs to provide interpreters."

Health care, however, is the exception, Marzuola says. He sees a continued slump in the need for translators in industries such as oil and gas for most of 2009.

"I expect a real slow summer, and maybe even into the fall," Marzuola says.

But companies like CD Language have an advantage, Marzuola says. It is one of the highest-paying firms in the city, and expects demanding standards of its employees. Retaining top talent, despite clients' budget cuts, will help the company weather slow times by maintaining client loyalty, he says.

"Companies, they don't switch good translators. They have a No. 1 and a No. 2," Marzuola says. "The agencies that are trying to do things a little cheaper with someone who walks in the door who charges a half-cent less, may not provide the same quality or value."

The skills that have helped Didoné grow her business in the face of disaster are rooted in her upbringing, she says. As a child, she watched the financial troubles in her home country during the 1970s and 1980s, learning the value of tenacity and fiscal discipline. That, she says, has served her well throughout her life.

"The way I grew up, you always want to be prepared," Didoné says. "You've got to be debt-free and in a healthy financial condition." ■

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