



Small Business Tapping Hispanic Markets

By [Colleen DeBaise](#) Published: September 22, 2006

AMELIA CEJA LIKES to prepare fine Mexican cuisine, like grilled oysters with tomatillo salsa and lime, and serve it with a stylish Chardonnay that is "fabulous" with a spicy meal. "If you have crisp acidity and lower alcohol, the wine pairs well with different styles of foods," she says.



Amelia Ceja

Ceja, who was born in Mexico, should know: She makes the wines at her family-owned Ceja Vineyards, in Napa, Calif. The five-year-old winery now produces 7,000 cases a year of syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and other wines, all designed to complement a worldly array of foods, particularly Latin-inspired meals. "The wine industry has ignored pretty much every cuisine that is not from Northern Europe," she says. "We said, 'Wait a minute, there is something wrong with this picture.'"

Like many Hispanic entrepreneurs, Ceja isn't lamenting a lack of marketing to her culture but rather seizing an opportunity. With Hispanics rapidly becoming the largest minority group in this country and increasingly wielding buying clout, everyone from Fortune 500 corporations to television stations to sports stadiums are waking up to this growing consumer market. But business owners whose roots are in places like Mexico or Latin America or Puerto Rico are discovering a new-found advantage: With deep knowledge of Latin culture and united by the Spanish language, they inherently know best how to reach Hispanic customers.

Carol Sanchez, who was 8 years old when her family emigrated from Peru in 1970, now operates an accounting firm in Natick, Mass. She has been surprised at the response from the Hispanic community, particularly Dominican and Puerto

Rican business owners who need accounting services. "They prefer to work with someone who speaks Spanish," she says. "Most of the conversations are in English, but if I have to explain it again, I can explain it again in Spanish." Being able to switch between languages makes her clients "feel more comfortable," she says.

Now, Sanchez and her partner, Maria Santiago, who was born in Puerto Rico, plan to open a second office in East Boston, home to large numbers of Central and South Americans. "The need from the community is pulling us in more than we ever thought," says Sanchez, who estimates that about 65% of her firm's clients are Hispanic. Sanchez & Santiago is the only Latina-owned accounting firm in Massachusetts. "Right now it's nice," she says, "but I want competition."

She likely won't have to wait long. Hispanics, who make up 14% of the total U.S. population, are expected to control more disposable personal income for goods and services than any other minority group by 2007, according to a report released in August by the University of Georgia's Selig Center for Economic Growth. The economic clout of Hispanics has risen from \$212 billion in 1990 to an estimated \$863.1 billion in 2007, the report found.

A growing number of Hispanic entrepreneurs are providing business-to-business services, such as tax preparation, bookkeeping and management consulting, to other Hispanic-owned companies, says Tim Rios, national spokesman for Wells Fargo's Latino Business Services unit.

Hispanics are opening small businesses at a rate three times faster than the national average, according to [census data](#) released in March, and now own about 1.6 million businesses. "There is no doubt that savvy entrepreneurs — both male and female — are going to find a way to make a part of these businesses their clients," Rios says. "It's very viable, and it's growing."

Wells Fargo, which has a \$5 billion lending goal to Hispanic-owned businesses by 2010, each September during Hispanic Heritage Month sponsors the Anna Maria Arias awards for Latina entrepreneurs, a fast-growing subset. Businesses owned by Hispanic women grew by nearly 64% between 1997 and 2004, compared with the 9% growth rate of all private firms, according to a [2004 report](#) by the Center for Women's Business Research. Winners of the contest, named after the late founder of Latina Style magazine, receive a \$5,000 cash grant to expand their business.

Many of this year's winners, including accountant Sanchez, focus on the Hispanic business community, seeing it as an untapped marketplace. Another winner, Nancy Marmolejo of Anaheim, Calif., started Comadre Coaching to provide work/life counseling to Latina entrepreneurs. She hadn't planned to focus on that specific market but found that Hispanic businesswomen who lacked other professional resources were "the people who responded the most positively, and

where I had the most impact." She's currently planning a "Latinpreneur" coaching certification so she can sign up more Spanish-speaking coaches to work with her clients. "When you focus on a niche, it just makes things so much easier," she says.

Hispanic entrepreneurs who reach out to their fellow Latin consumers say they're rewarded with repeat business. Ceja, the winemaker, says about 50% of her business consists of Hispanic clients. Many of her customers first learn about wine at Spanish-language tastings that Ceja Vineyards sponsors, sometimes paired with homemade Mexican food, in the winery's tasting room.

"People love it, even if they speak English, because it's learning about wine in their own language," she says. "A lot of people have never been invited in to that magical experience."