

Using Cultural Intelligence to Build Diverse Business Relationships

Ivette Mayo will address maximizing revenue in a bilingual market at the fall conference.

By Pete Schnatz

Ivette Mayo learned to embrace cultural differences at an early age.

It's a lesson that she believes is vital in today's business world, whether you're selling widgets or renting storage space. And it will also be a key topic of Mayo's presentation, on maximizing revenues in a bilingual market, this month at the Self Storage Association's fall conference and trade show in Las Vegas.

A self-described "Navy brat," Mayo was eight years old when she left her native Puerto Rico for the U.S. mainland on the first stop of her life's many journeys. Mayo's itinerary grew during her marketing and sales career with a global airline, and expanded further with several unique outposts over a dozen years of her marriage to a professional baseball player.

Experiencing Cultures

From that very first move, Mayo learned the importance of understanding and respecting the customs, traditions and daily routines of people she came in contact with.

"Every time I had to go somewhere new, I had to adapt," Mayo said. "I found myself making mistakes, but I learned through those mistakes. People would ingratiate themselves to me because they realized I was going out of my way to please them. They would take me places the typical tourist would never see, and it gave me a better chance to embed myself in their culture."

One of Mayo's more functional discoveries occurred in Tokyo.

"I learned how to use chopsticks," she said with a laugh. "Silverware can be hard to find, and unless you're carrying around a box of plastic spoons and forks, you better be able to eat with chopsticks or you'll starve to death."

Navigating Cultural Awareness

Banking on her experiences, Mayo founded a cultural consulting and training company—Yo Soy I Am. The three-year-old business, based out of her home near Tampa, Florida, aims to help companies create greater cultural awareness and respect for diversity.

Mayo emphasizes what she calls "cultural intelligence," stressing that understanding the impact of an individual's cultural background on his behavior is essential for effective business. Similarly, a "cultural quotient" measures an individual's ability to engage successfully in any environment or social setting.

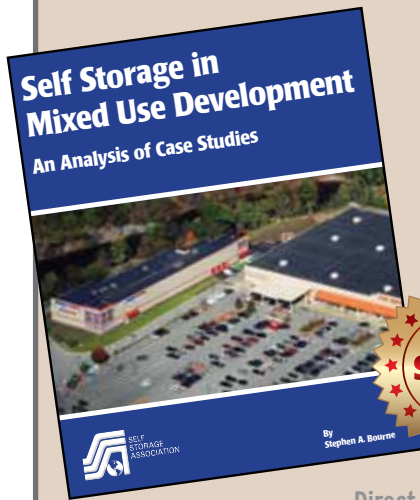
"One thing I have to constantly remind business people is that culture is the dynamic of the place where you are, and it's constantly evolving," Mayo said. "We have to deal with the emotional aspects of culture. In corporate America, people are tested to see how they can suppress and handle their emotions in a corporate

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Ivette Mayo feels that learning to adapt to different cultures is a key to success in today's working world.

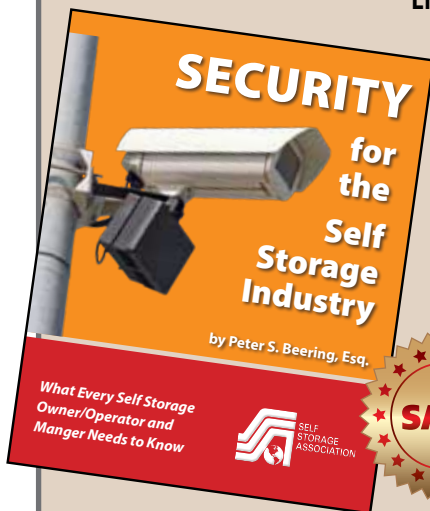
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environment. But I think it's more important to ask how you open yourself to a multi-cultural community, and how do you adapt policies to embrace some of the differences?"

Avoid Generalizations

In a presentation for a regional self storage group in the St. Petersburg, Florida, area two years ago, Mayo pointed out that it is dangerous to generalize when building a business plan targeting the Hispanic community.

"There's been a whole paradigm change of the traditional Hispanic in Florida," Mayo said. "While it has always been a gateway to Latin America, you're seeing more people coming here from Central and South America and the Caribbean that are college-educated entrepreneurs who were highly successful in their businesses in their countries. They're not the people who fled Cuba or the farmhands who moved from Mexico, and they don't all speak the same dialect. And it isn't necessarily the things we see—like how they dress and what kind of cars they drive—that define a culture as much as people's core values, their beliefs, how they process information, how they communicate."

Build Trust

The key to cross any barriers, according to Mayo, is for business people to make their customers feel comfortable.

"When it comes to cultural differences, people want to deal with people they feel they know and can trust," she said. "Customers are loyal when they feel like you're part of their community. If you're able to make small talk you can make them feel comfortable, and then you find out what they're looking for in self storage. If you have your information printed in Spanish, all the better, because even bilingual speakers are more comfortable getting info in their native tongue."

Mayo emphasized that being more culturally aware from a business perspective is beneficial no matter what the community—whether it's Hispanic or Armenian.

"I tell clients to call their local government office, or even their local newspaper, where they have demographics that define the racial makeup of the community. The information is usually free and it gives you a snapshot of who's out there. Then after I know who they are, I see if that ethnic group is part of my current business model. If not, I target the community by making sure my next hire speaks their language.

"To succeed," Mayo said, "I'm going to find a common ground, build a relationship and then talk business." ❖