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Latinos have a pathway to progress

Author(s): Frank Moraga
moraga@insidevc.com **Date:** April 14, 2003 **Section:** Business

Filing tax returns sometimes can be a daunting task with archaic language that often seems other worldly. Try filing tax forms if you are a business owner who primarily has a Spanish-speaking clientele. Such was the problem facing Garden Grove resident Armando Villase--or. The provider of computers and software systems to Latino families in Orange County found help through a software program offered by Electronic Sales and Use Tax Inc.

The Newbury Park-based company has been authorized by the California State Board of Equalization as the state's first bilingual Web site for the electronic payment of sales and use taxes.

With a few clicks of a computer mouse Villase--or was able to file sales taxes electronically becoming one of the first in the state to use the system in Spanish.

"I like to use the Internet" said Villase--or owner of Family Education Products. "You put everything on the same form and you are done in minutes. They took the payment from my business account. It was very fast."

Officials at Electronic Sales and Use Tax Inc. believe there is a lucrative market for e-filing both in Spanish and English.

There are an estimated 1 million businesses in California eligible to e-file their sales and use taxes with the state and a significant portion are owned by Latinos said Richard Paul the company's chief executive officer.

Because of the state's growing Latino population base Paul and Co-Founder and Chief Financial Officer Ramon Rochin felt the time was right to go into that market as well.

"Being a Latino-owned business we believe we are in tune with that culture" he said. "We have been doing some marketing in both languages. We got information cards in English and Spanish and we

did a Telemundo interview in January."

Target: Ventura County

The company has been able to line up Spanish-speaking clients in Los Angeles Orange and other counties and is now making an effort to find clients in Ventura County.

"Because of the sheer volume of Spanish-speaking people here it seemed a natural thing in this area" he said.

Seeking to cut down on the amount and expense of filing a paper return (it costs the state \$5 to process an electronic return compared with \$30 for a paper return) tax officials have been seeking to expand electronic filing.

"Tax Web sites for electronic filing are rapidly evolving because it is a faster and easier way to file taxes" Jeanne Smith coordinator of the state Board of Equalization's Electronic Filing Program stated in a release. "Having sales tax forms available in Spanish for e-filing simply makes it more efficient."

To receive the authorization by the state Electronic Sales and Use Tax Inc. had to meet strict standards and so far is just one of three companies authorized to offer electronic filing.

"We have been working with the Board of Equalization and they have put text on their site to let business owners know that our site is available in Spanish" Paul said.

Online site

To use the system a business owner can visit www.efileSalesTax.com and click onto the "En Espa--ol" icon. Business owners who use the site are required to type in their Seller's Permit Account Number issued by the Board of Equalization. They can then register review tax forms access help files and receive live telephone support all in Spanish. No new software is needed by the business owner.

The system calculates all the taxes automatically and the businesses owner typically can complete his filing within five to 10 minutes Paul said.

"They get a confirmation back from the state in 15 to 30 seconds" he said.

Another advantage is businesses can review all their past filings electronically he said.

Business owners can e-file anytime from the end of their filing period and the due date and can specify the date when their payment is deducted from their bank account.

Once the forms are completed and filed tax payments are made via electronic transfer from the business' bank account directly to the Board of Equalization.

The company is offering free filing for first-time users followed thereafter by a charge of \$4.95 for each filing.

Security concerns

Electronic e-filing has been slow to catch on with business owners and individual tax filers who have concerns about security of their personal data.

"People have a hesitation but we use state-of-the-art security so no information is shared except with the Board of Equalization" Paul said. "Everything is encrypted and protected.

"It's a challenge to get people over that hurdle but they are getting more comfortable. It's more secure than doing it by paper. It's transmitted straight from one computer to another so it is not lost in the mail."

Mary McVicker has used the e-filing system since last fall when she opened her Mary's Little Christmas Shop in Simi Valley.

"I just did it yesterday she said. "It's real quick and easy. It's not a problem at all."

After years of filing paper returns and sometimes standing in the line at the post office to get the correct postmark Lonny deBoisblanc decided to go to e-filing earlier this year.

"It was very easy and convenient" said deBoisblanc president of LTD Tech Inc. an automotive service equipment manufacturer in Newbury Park. "It was right on the deadline day and it was due so it was nice using it immediately."

Future

E-filing definitely is the wave of the future said deBoisblanc who has recommended e-filing to another business with which he deals.

"It E will take time for people to get comfortable with the security and technology" he said. "But as they use it more it will become the norm over time."

The time also appears right for companies to offer technology services to the Spanish-speaking community.

Villase--or of Family Education Products in the city of Orange believes other Latino business owners will take advantage of the e-filing software program as they become more comfortable using computers.

Saw a need

After 15 years working for other technology companies Villase--or decided early this year to open his own business because he saw a growing number of Latinos using technology.

Villase--or -- whose company provides a \$2400 package to families that includes a computer software technical support and training sessions -- finds many of his clients are surprised they can use computers to pay bills do their banking and even pay taxes.

"The only thing that's missing for Hispanics is orientation" he said. "They are afraid that if they use the computer people can see their credit-card and private information. But if people understand computers they can use them to do more things."

Like his clients Villase--or prefers to use the computer.

"I like to use the Internet for everything because when you call by telephone people sometimes don't understand and get things wrong" he said. "I'd rather not use the telephone. I'd rather use the computer."

On the net: www.efileSalesTax.com

www.boe.ca.gov

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