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Hispanics—The Ability to Adapt

Wilka Varela Toppins, operating vice president, diversity strategies for the giant retailer Macy's, Inc., has been in the position eight months. Puerto-Rico born and a cum laude graduate with a juris doctor in 1990 from Tulane Law School, she offers the following advice for Hispanics considering her field: "A career in a retail environment is very driven, fast-paced and focused," she says.

Therefore, it is imperative to continuously grow and adapt to the changing retail landscape and business environment, being willing to look for the next approach or new idea to stay competitive and fresh. In addition, the industry is consumer-centric and having a good perspective and learning about consumer behavior and preferences gives an employee an edge. Hispanics, Toppins adds, already possess many of the attributes and leadership values that a company in the retail industry requires and respects.

"For example, Hispanics are very flexible and able to adapt given our collective backgrounds. Most of us came to this country as children and had to adapt to a new country and life. Some of us, while born here, had to help our families adapt as they became accustomed to living in the United States. So, talk about an ability to adapt!," she declares

In addition, Hispanics will soon become the largest ethnic group in the United States, bringing with them their unique perspectives and cultural insights, so for any business that is customer-centric, this is an important attribute, she adds.

Last but not least, Hispanics value people and relationships greatly, Toppins states. "Our cultural heritage is based on the power of relationships; therefore, we are extremely well suited for a career in a retail industry for any company that wants to address this consumer group."

Toppins's position requires excellent verbal and written communication skills, as much of her work is done on the telephone as well as E-mail. In addition, interpersonal skills and her ability to persuade and partner with different groups within the company are critical. She also needs to have great organizational habits and



Wilka Varela Toppins, Operating Vice President, Diversity Strategies, Macy's Inc.

time- management training as she is responsible for developing and executing national events for the company.

Day-to-day activities provide her with opportunities to create ways to link Macy's and the community that are mutually beneficial. "Macy's is a large company with many resources and an excellent brand name. Being able to bring Macy's to the Latino community and, in turn, bring the Latino community to Macy's, is what I like best about my job," she relates. In addition, she enjoys to help effectuate change in her organization, raising awareness of the benefits of diversity in this retail corporation.

Mentors help a great deal, Toppins remarks, as every organization has a set of rules that they value and respect, many of them unspoken and unwritten.

"Mentors help you figure out the landscape a lot quicker and ensure your success. In addition, they help you develop a plan for your career growth, functioning like career coaches," she advises.

The most interesting project she was involved in was developing a national partnership with the Hispanic Scholarship Fund: Macy's provides eight Latino college students with a \$5,000 scholarship and an opportunity to experience a paid summer internship with Macy's. "This program is fantastic," Toppins says, "because not only will the student benefit in a significant way from Macy's involvement in this program, Macy's will also benefit by getting to know these talented Latinos during the summer internship program and hopefully, convert them to full-time employees."

Toppins has more than 17 years of combined legal and entrepreneurial experience. Her background includes working with major Fortune 100 companies as a lawyer, working as an international lawyer, and becoming the owner of two businesses including her own law firm. She is the recipient of the 2006 national "Top 10 Latina Entrepreneur" award from LatinaStyle magazine and Wells Fargo Bank and the 2006 Houston "Emerging 10 Business" award presented by the Houston Minority Business Council. Her bachelor of science degree in political science was earned at the University of Massachusetts with honors.

By Lois Vidaver