

# Sylvia Acevedo

This Austin entrepreneur and former Fortune 500 executive is breaking down barriers on the course and in business.

By Rebecca MacDonald

For Sylvia Acevedo, mixing golf and business comes as naturally as the Spanish language she grew up speaking in her New Mexico home. The first-generation daughter of Mexican parents translated her bilingual skills into a successful business when she saw the need for a product that would cross language barriers between English-speaking employers and an increasingly multicultural workforce. Her Communicard pocket-guides and card sets use illustrated drawings to help English and Spanish speakers communicate common contractor and housecleaning tasks. The business was founded with the help of an investor over the course of several meetings that Acevedo says took place on the golf course.

“Golf is a great way to meet people and to network. I find it so valuable for business,” says Acevedo, who now makes her home in Austin. “I’ve met people through golf that I would never have had the opportunity to meet otherwise.”

For example, Acevedo says she met the publisher of FORTUNE magazine while playing in a charity event when she worked for Dell, Inc.

## Hitting buckets with Tiger

Growing up in New Mexico, Acevedo remembers admiring budding golf prodigy Nancy Lopez, and says she is often mistaken on the golf course for the LPGA Hall of Famer, “Although not for my game!” she laughs. “I’ve followed her career ever since.”

Acevedo didn’t learn to play until after she graduated from Stanford University in California, where she earned her master’s degree in engineering. She went to work in the high-tech industry, eventually holding executive positions at Fortune 500 companies such as IBM, Dell, Apple Computer and Autodesk. She says she soon realized that golf would be



an important tool for business and began taking lessons.

“I remember going to the driving range at Stanford – this was back in the era of (LPGA star) Julie Inkster – and we used to see this kid there every day. He’d walk by with a huge bucket of balls heading for the driving range. You just knew from his work ethic that he was going places. His name was Tiger Woods.”

As an alumni of Stanford, Acevedo had access to the course, where it was easy to invite customers to play. “My colleagues all knew I could get them on the course, so I never lacked for playing partners,” she laughs. “But I found golf offered something the office couldn’t. In the office, your time is always structured. Golf offered unstructured time to just get to know my colleagues better as people.”

Her ability to play led to more business opportunities when Acevedo was hired as a model by an advertiser looking for a believable professional woman who played golf.

“I got paid gigs as a professional model by advertisers or resorts trying to capture that demographic, because they couldn’t find any good photography that represented Hispanic women,” says Acevedo.

In fact, when a local Austin magazine ran an article on Acevedo with a photo of her holding a golf club, she says she was amazed at how women responded. “So many women have stopped and asked me how I learned to play and how they could get started,” she says. “I try to encourage all of them to take lessons and give it a try.”

A job offer from Dell brought Acevedo to Austin, which she now calls home. “I love Austin for the hill country and the beautiful golf courses!” she exclaims. While she gets frequent invitations to play at private clubs such as Barton Creek Resort, Onion Creek and Austin Country Club, she says she lives “a stone’s throw” from Lion’s Municipal Course and plays there often. She’s also a member of the Austin chapter of the Executive Women’s Golf Association and volunteers for The First Tee, a charity organization that teaches underprivileged children the game.

### On “owning” the red tees

It was in Austin that Acevedo started her new venture, CommuniCard, LLC. As a home remodeling enthusiast, she understood the challenges contractors faced in communicating with Spanish-speaking workers. Before the idea became reality, Acevedo spent long hours researching her market, conducting focus groups to come up with the best format for her idea. Many concepts were developed and scratched before she hit on the combination of fold-out guides and card sets that let pictures do the talking. Illustrations are the key to the



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products, making them faster and easier to use than English/Spanish dictionaries and a reliable communication tool for trade-specific tasks. The foldout guides are designed to fit in a front or back pocket, and the card sets can be left behind as instructions when a house cleaner visits. Acevedo also recently added a new product line for law enforcement. The Police Traffic CommuniCard, which offers a pocket-sized guide to communicate common traffic issues such as “May I see your ID and insurance?” and “You exceeded the speed limit,” are being used by the Austin Police Department.

After only two years in business, Acevedo’s accomplishments led to an award in 2004 as the National Business-woman of the Year by the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. Her advice to women starting out in both business and golf: “Failure is not making a mistake. It’s failing to get up and learn from your mistake and try again. In golf, you always have a chance to make a recovery. You can’t control the outside forces, but you can control your attitude. The same holds true for business.”

She says that for women learning the game, “Don’t apologize for your game, and don’t be embarrassed about “owning” the forward tees! I love playing from the red tees, and in tournament settings, you often give your team an advantage because you can drive the ball farther from there.” 🏌️