

THE MEXICAN BUSINESS CULTURE

You may have done all the research necessary to assess your market potential in Mexico. But all that preparation could go down the drain if, unknowingly, you trample a Mexican taboo. What may seem minor in the Canadian context could have more consequence to a Mexican associate. Learning about one another's basic cultural attitudes is too often overlooked in the heat of business.

Communication in trade requires a successful exchange of information, intentions and expectations. It requires understanding and respect. Culture encompasses behaviours and values. One study likens it to an iceberg in which behaviour comprises 10 per cent and values 90.

In the case of Mexico, there are some simple guidelines for the new business traveller. With a grasp of these, it may become easier to absorb and comprehend other cultural nuances.

The family is paramount, taking precedence over all other aspects of life. This may lead to a reluctance on the part of an employee or representative in Mexico to move from one part of the country to another. It may mean your Mexican rep will choose a family member for his or

her staff, or for contracting.

Friendship is a cornerstone of the Mexican culture. There is emphasis on the group as opposed to the individual; Mexicans are warm to everyone, and make friends with those responding in kind. Foreign business people will find it invaluable to build personal friendships with counterparts: it is difficult for a Mexican to enter a joint venture with a stranger, and more so if that stranger seems unfriendly.

Leisure activities form a part of the business round in Mexico, as elsewhere in North America. Breakfast or lunch meetings are part of the business culture, and, if the relationship becomes more personal, Mexicans will invite business contacts to their homes for dinner. Leisure activities provide a favourable atmosphere and environment for the growth of mutual trust. Attractions in Mexico are not dissimilar to those in Canada: spectator sports (primarily soccer and baseball), evening entertainments, dancing and eating out are favoured pursuits.

Early acquaintance can set the tone for how a relationship will develop. For most Mexicans, questions related to strictly personal matters such as marital status, number of children, income, experience, are inappropriate in the beginning

stages. Questions on the business environment, the economy, the type of organization the individual is associated with are the preferred starting points, with personal information being volunteered once some level of trust has been established.

Women are increasingly prominent in public life. But in the matter of male-female business relationships, women have not yet gained the level of equality they expect in Canada. Continued association with Canadian and American business women has made Mexicans more aware of their different style and experience, but misinterpretations may still occur. It is expected that business women will dress in a very businesslike fashion — tailored, conservative, covered.

When it comes to expressing opinions, the styles of Canadians and Mexicans are somewhat different. A Canadian might begin by stating a position and then outlining the reason for holding it. A Mexican would be more likely to build a case that unfolded gradually, with the position emerging as conclusion. This requires that the Canadian listener not jump to conclusions before hearing the whole argument. While Mexicans are willing to express opinions when asked, in some circumstances they might hold back. If there is a significant difference in the age or status of the participants in a conversation, a subordinate or junior would be expected to support a superior or elder, regardless of his or her views. Where age and status were comparable, disagreements would be advanced openly.

Mexicans are very sensitive to personal criticism, particularly in front of friends. In Mexican culture, the open expression of strong or negative emotion is not encouraged. Group harmony is preserved through emotional restraint, except if people feel they are being exploited or criticized

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personally. In such cases, all restraints are off. The other side of emotional behaviour, however, is a marked capacity by Mexicans to empathize with others, and in potentially confrontational situations they will strive to reach a consensus.

Time slippages are a fact of life in the Mexican business culture. There is less of the stereotype of "Mexican time" than in the past, but it is wise to include a time cushion for the unanticipated.

Use of titles is appropriate to those

other than friends and family. Aside from *Senor* and *Senora*, occupational titles together with family names are often used among casual acquaintances: *Doctor(a)*, *Maestro(a)*, *Ingeniero(a)*. With high ranking officials, use *Senor(a)* and title: *Senor Gobernador* (Mr. Governor), *Senora Embajadora* (Madame Ambassador).

In Mexico, as in most other countries, culture is not homogeneous. It is important not to stereotype in the process of seeking to understand the

common cultural values of the Mexican business world. Very few of the images of Mexicans as presented by older films and books are true today, if they ever were, and it is annoying to Mexicans to be told, in however well-intentioned a way, that things have changed.

Nonetheless, one stereotype tends to hold very true: Mexicans are a warm people, and are generally kind. Mistakes are not likely to be fatal if there is clear evidence of good will.

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is closed to them."

Given the paucity, to date, of women in industrial circles, is there any resistance on the part of Mexican men to the brigade of powerful women executives, often armed with MBAs or other high-level education, and often aggressive in approach after learning in Canada or the United States how to compete in what used to be known as a "man's world"?

"No," says Ambassador Fuentes. "At first Mexican men were curious, very surprised. But there are women doing business in the long term in Mexico, including Canadian women, and they are very highly regarded."

The Ambassador cautions women not to be put off by the style of Mexican businessmen. "They may flirt a little, admire your eyes, or your attire. We are a physical people; an arm may be put on a shoulder — this to men or women. It should not be confused with harassment, or a patronising or paternal attitude. It is simply a cultural response — it is done in friendship — and it will generally take place at the beginning of a meeting. After a few minutes it is

down to business and things will be perfectly serious, whether the participants are men or women."

Canadian businesswomen, Ms. Fuentes points out, are very soon going to be dealing with the generation that is now in university, where the female population is 50 per cent or more. Almost half the population of Mexico is under 20 years. "We have a young cabinet: they are in their late 30s and early 40s. Youth is opportunity, and opportunity can be seized or squandered. 55 per cent of the budget of Mexico goes on social spending, and 6 per cent

of GDP is directed to education."

In working with these young people, the Ambassador echoes the experience of many when she says, "Canadians have to be more aggressive in entering our market, to come in for the long term. Remember that Mexicans like to see the face of the people we do business with — we are not a phone and fax business culture. We give a lot of importance to personal contact; business people will be invited to the homes of their Mexican counterparts, will meet their children. It's a question of chemistry, what makes a partnership or business venture tick."

Ms. Fuentes sees the NAFTA as an opportunity for both Canada and Mexico to find common mechanisms for coping with their giant neighbour. "With cooperation and integration, we can learn about each other, exchange views. But not try to change each other," she warns. "We will respect our differences, and learn about them. Things might be difficult at times, but we will not let that deter us. We can learn from you, but we will not become you. We will continue to be very Mexican."

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Upcoming Events

EXPOCONTROL '94 (Mexico City; National Stand) — June, 1994 — Manufacturing/robotics show/conference.

TECNO MEUBLE '94 (Guadalajara; National Stand) — July, 1994 — Furniture industry suppliers' event.

EXPO ALIMENTOS (Monterrey; National Stand) — August, 1994 — Focus on food processing, packaging, labelling, bottling, arranged in cooperation with Investment Canada and industry association.

GIS MISSION to Mexico and Chile — August, 1994 — Up to 15 companies to participate.

EXPO SPORT (Mexico City; Info Booth) — August, 1994 — Sports and leisure products trade show.

Details on these and other events may be obtained from Latin American and Caribbean Trade Division, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Facsimile: (613) 944-0479.