

TEMPRANO ASSOCIATES

Temprano Associates is an established Ottawa-based firm that has been successfully selling its architectural services in Mexico. It first came in contact with that market when the firm's owner, Eliseo Temprano, was invited to Mexico to discuss the implications of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) by virtue of his position on the Canadian Architectural Council.

A key advantage was Temprano's fluent Spanish, which surprised and pleased Mexicans who noted that no American business people ever dealt with them in their own language. This opened the door to a wide network of contacts throughout Mexico. Temprano took the opportunity to give talks on architecture, Canada, and the NAFTA. "Leave your attitudes at home and build relationships," says Temprano. He also feels that his knowledge of and respect for Mexico's language and culture has been a key to his success. Also important has been his non-aggressive marketing strategy that relies on personal contact and patience to build a solid long-term business.

The approach is beginning to pay off. Many of his Mexican contacts have been, in effect, marketing Temprano's wood-framework architectural techniques and are now calling with business opportunities. For example, the company is currently designing an office and exhibition facility in Mexico City.

Temprano's experiences in Mexico have led him to conclude that Mexicans are generally not familiar with Canadian capabilities. And yet, there are great opportunities for partnerships between the two countries in areas such as planning, environmental protection, transfer of appropriate technology, project management, communications (as in public opinion polling or surveys) and approval processes. These are perhaps not traditional areas for architects, but they do represent real needs where there is ample scope to develop a business.

One thing that Temprano does counsel Canadians to do is to look for a "made in Mexico" solution to Mexican needs. Mexicans are a proud people who cherish their independence and who appreciate a cooperative approach that shares benefits. Partnerships between equals offer better opportunities for mutually fruitful business that will extend over the long term. Thus, instead of going to the expense of setting up a Mexican branch office or hiring locally, Temprano is looking for associates and partners in various cities as projects arise that require them.

Mexican culture is changing, however. Both government and business are challenging traditional business practices. The youthfulness of the workforce and the liberalization of the regulatory environment has given birth to a new "can do" spirit which is gradually permeating both society and business. Even so, old customs die hard.

Honour is important. The sensitive business person deals first with the individual and then with the issue. For this reason, an employee should never be corrected in front of peers. This could cause personal damage which may be impossible to repair. Privacy and delicacy are much appreciated in such situations.

Canadian business people with extensive experience in Mexico have commented on the reluctance of Mexicans to say no. It can take a while for the Canadian newcomer to understand how to interpret the "ye"s which has been given in response to a question. Saying that one does not have the answer is difficult for Mexicans; they tend to be very polite and solicitous at all times. It is better to provide no answer at all than to deliver bad news. Sensitivity is essential and there is no substitute for experience.

Competent Spanish speakers who are well-acquainted with the interests of the Canadian firm are vital to any negotiations. This remains true even when the Mexican officials and company executives on the other side are proficient in English. Even if expert translation is available, language can still be a barrier to doing business in Mexico. It is not so much a question of rendering words exactly but of capturing nuances and interpreting gestures. Canadians doing business in Mexico should be careful to go beyond simple words to understand the spirit in which the transaction is being conducted.

The selection and training of personnel to manage international partnerships is critical to how the firm is able to deal with associated cross-cultural issues. These managers must be able to:

- appreciate their partners' points of view;
- understand how the behaviour of the respective parties is perceived by the partner;
- express their ideas so that counterparts can easily understand both their intentions and the messages communicated;
- manage stress and ambiguity; and
- sensitize themselves to the cultural background of others and adapt their management style as appropriate to the situation in which the partnership operates.