

difficult for Mexicans to do and 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 (see box).

One surviving relic from the old days of doing business in Mexico is *la mordida* or the bite, the practice of taking bribes. It may be encountered by Canadian companies seeking permits or licences from officials. It might be encountered in dealings with private companies offering some form of preferential treatment. Sometimes the demand is quite explicit. At other times it is so subtle as to be easily misunderstood. The Mexican government and the business community have adopted an increasingly hard line toward the practice, recognizing that business must be conducted fairly and above the table, and that Mexico's reputation for doing business in an ethical fashion is on the line.

The backlash against *la mordida* sometimes catches companies by surprise. Some firms have found themselves blacklisted because they assumed they should offer bribes in exchange for commercial favours. Doors have been known to slam shut if the wrong approach is taken.

On the other hand, the campaign against *la mordida* sometimes takes extremes that are surprising to Canadians. One company tells how its purchasing department sent out calendars with the corporate inscription at Christmas time. One was sent to a government department. It was promptly returned, unopened with a note saying that the enclosure could not be accepted. Government officials have been known to return small pocket-sized agendas and even Christmas cards unopened, because they fear being marked as practitioners of *la mordida*.

"Canadians have a very traditional way of conducting business and therefore, knowing Mexico as little as they do, they are nervous about doing business there. Travel will dispel their hesitation. If the interest Canadians have expressed on paper were translated into a visit to Mexico, they would be much better positioned."

Alfonso Salazar, Toronto Director, Bancomext

Language

"Language extends far beyond the spoken word. Very often that which was written in English or Spanish, and which both parties have appeared to understand, is badly interpreted in practice. The innuendo of the language, be it English or Spanish, is as important as the spoken word. Body language often communicates the message and cannot be readily interpreted by someone new to either the Mexican or Canadian culture. The nuances of body language will tell you more about the state of your business transaction than the spoken word. Misinterpretations can quickly dispel the advances made in your discussions."

David Adam, Minister Counsellor, Embassy of Canada

A Note on Mexican Names

Mexicans tend to use the family names of both their fathers and their mothers as in Carlos (given name) Salinas (father's family name) de Gortari (mother's family name). The father's family name comes first and is the one that is normally used, for example when asking for the individual. The full name is generally used in correspondence. Any titles or academic degrees should also be added to the address or salutation in a letter and be used in conversation with individuals that you do not know very well.