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## WOMEN IN MEXICO:

### Mexico's Ambassador sees continuing role change

Can women expect to be treated as equals when they do business in Mexico? Mexican and Canadian cultural attitudes differ. But according to Mexico's Ambassador to Canada, women pursuing business in Mexico can be confident they will be treated seriously and professionally.

"There have always been many women in government and public life in Mexico," says the Ambassador, Sandra Fuentes-Bérain. "And in the media, the arts, the judiciary, even the Supreme Court. One of the major union leaders in Mexico — the education union, representing about 1.6 million people — is a woman, and there are many in the labour field. I'm not sure why, but there are fewer in industry, traditionally." It is curious, she notes, that when state enterprises began to be privatized in Mexico, suddenly fewer women were visible in government.

The quadrilingual Ambassador comes from Monterrey — "a very conservative part of Mexico" — where it was considered unusual, when she was a student, for women to enter the profession of law. Not only did she take her degree from Mexico's National University, she went on to advanced studies of economic law in London and entered the diplomatic corps.



Mexico's Ambassador to Canada,  
Sandra Fuentes-Bérain

Ambassador Fuentes served in embassies in Great Britain, France, Italy and the United States before achieving the rank of Ambassador as Mexico's Consul General in Hong Kong. The latter posting, plus some of her departmental work, gave her the expertise President Salinas was seeking as implementation of the NAFTA drew near, and she presented her credentials in Ottawa in February, 1993.

The Ambassador suspects that women's roles may change in Mexico in the foreseeable future. For the moment, however, she sees women's

private sector involvement taking place at a more local level than in the large industrial enterprises.

"The financial crisis (in the early 1980s) forced women on to the marketplace. They have found a place in small or medium sized businesses, for example bakeries, things that may have grown out of a domestic situation. We're seeing a lot of unified family businesses."

She adds that, "In the rural areas, women are very active; they tend crops and take products to market while the men may be employed elsewhere. There are many women labourers — bricklayers and the like."

Before the crisis, Ms. Fuentes acknowledges, "A man would have had problems with his wife working. It's a fact that the woman is still seen as the household manager. However, if she resolves that, she may also look for a job; in the lower middle class, many couples are both working."

It's a matter of opportunity, the Ambassador says. "It's a question of education, which is open equally to men and women. In almost every department in the universities and colleges and technical institutions, there are now as many or more women students. Nothing

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# THE MEXICAN BUSINESS CULTURE

**Y**ou 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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## Cultural Differences — from page II

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.

## Ambassador Fuentes — from page I

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."

## CANADA DIRECT ON-LINE

**Canada Direct** is a service offered to business travellers and tourists when travelling overseas. It is available in 87 countries and is offered jointly by Teleglobe and the Stentor alliance of companies.

When abroad, callers using **Canada Direct** are connected with a Canadian operator who provides service in English or French. The charges can be reversed or billed to a calling card at the Canadian rate in effect. With **Canada Direct**, Canadians can avoid language problems with foreign operators, or unexpected high surcharges.

As of mid-February, Mexico was added to the countries where **Canada Direct** is effective. The number to call in Mexico to take advantage of this service is 95-800-010-1990.

## 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.



# Canadian Exporters: Profile

Nancy Knowlton, Vice-President, Operations • **Smart Technologies Inc.** • Calgary

Calgary business-woman Nancy Knowlton sees Mexico as a market ready for new, innovative technologies. That is why she is sparing little effort to promote her company's software products in this expanding market.

Smart Technologies is a six-year-old company that produces and markets high-quality, innovative and practical software. SMART 2000, its signature product, is a user-friendly, multimedia conference, training and presentation system for Windows. It allows computer images to be projected on to a blank, touch-sensitive screen. The software includes a notepad whose notes and diagrams can be memorized and printed on any kind of data-processing equipment.

Smart has about 40 employees, and has sales offices in Canada and the United States (North Carolina and Southern California) and projects sales of \$8 million in 1994.

Exporting is the mainstay of Smart's business, with its major markets including Japan, Australia, the United States, Europe and the Middle East. "We are actively trying to expand," said Nancy Knowlton, Vice-President Operations, before leaving for the COMDEX (communications expo) in Mexico City.

"We have been to many U.S.-based trade shows, and have met some representatives from Mexico. It is directly as a result of NAFTA that we are looking at the Mexican market. Before undertaking this trip, we talked to other companies that export to Mexico, and have heard

their experiences and learned from them."

Smart engages in partnership agreements where appropriate in order to maximize the company's effectiveness. In December 1992, Smart and Intel Corporation entered a long-term agreement to jointly develop data-conferencing products for desktop and conference room applications. Both companies will have the right to sell and distribute each other's products.

**"It is directly as a result of NAFTA that we are looking at the Mexican market"**

Ms. Knowlton said that Smart Technologies undertook considerable research before venturing into any new market. Well aware of the need for a Mexican presence in that market, she said, "We will only operate through a Mexican distribution system. From feelers we put out, between 30 and 40 companies expressed interest in representing us. We asked them for meetings in Mexico City, and asked for plans and proposals, which we will study carefully.

"We have taken part in training

sessions on doing business in Mexico. Our biggest concern is the import restrictions. Mexico has a complex set of regulations — as complicated as I have ever seen. We had to have our Chamber of Commerce vouch for us. Once we have a Mexican distributor, I think it will be simpler — they'll be able to sort through all the Mexican requirements. We will learn all the regulations, and how to live with them."

Nonetheless, Ms. Knowlton feels there is some work to be done in streamlining the system of doing business between Canada and Mexico — "probably both ways" — as the volume of paperwork and translation requirements surprised her.

Smart Technologies participates in about 26 trade fairs annually. "There is no substitute for experience, or for the benefits provided by participation in trade fairs. Without these fairs, we would not be growing nearly as quickly," Nancy Knowlton has said.

As for Mexico, the future is bright, according to the company's researches. "Mexico needs to rebuild its infrastructures, a process that will require our type of expertise and advanced technology," Ms. Knowlton says.

## Access

**Access**, the newsletter of the new Access North America (ANA) program, is published monthly and only in *CanadExport*. Subscribers to *CanadExport* automatically receive *Access*. It examines opportunities for Canadian businesses, introduces some Canadians already operating in the Mexican and U.S. markets, profiles specific sectors, and notifies readers of forthcoming events related to doing business in Mexico.

Your feedback is welcomed; correspondence should be sent to Access, BCT, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1A 0G2, telephone (613) 992-5791.

For further information on a copy of a brochure on Access North America, contact InfoEx at (In Ottawa 944-4000).

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