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Cultural Awareness Key to International Business Success

By Jerry Pacheco, Executive Director, International Business Accelerator

New Mexicans are familiar with the stereotype about Mexican Americans and Hispanics — that people who have lived here for generations have the same tastes and preferences as recent arrivals from Mexico. But many of us are just as guilty of viewing Central and Latin American cultures as a homogeneous “Hispanic” mass, thus negating the rich diversity found in the customs and traditions of South and Central America.

Such generalizations are lethal to those of us who do business across national borders. The culturally insensitive businessperson risks offending the very people he wants to please and overlooks opportunities to market to various subgroups.

One size doesn't fit all

The simple tortilla illustrates how different traditions can be within a larger cultural group.

On my first visit to Mexico, I was surprised to be served a small corn tortilla rather than a large flour tortilla like those found in Northern New Mexico. My hosts stared when I tore the tortilla in half and put the remainder back in the tortilla container. When a member of this family later visited me in Northern New Mexico, it was my turn to be surprised when he grabbed a whole tortilla and put it on his plate.

This experience revealed sharp cultural differences in tortillas — and tortilla protocol. In Mexico, people don't break tortillas in half and put the rest back in the container. Where I come from, the tortillas are larger and most people take only part of the disc.

I have returned to this early lesson in my travels throughout Mexico, Latin America and the U.S. Categorizing people by ethnicity, nationality, gender and age is useful when planning a marketing strategy, but the astute businessperson recognizes the limits of this perspective and works hard to understand and appeal to different target markets.

Know your world

A company planning to do business in another country should research not only the market but also the people and customs of that country or region — especially the customs associated with the product or service being marketed and the people whom the company wants to reach. That said, salespeople or representatives should graciously overlook gaffes committed by business

associates from other countries or cultures, as there's a good chance your foreign associates are doing the same for you.

The International Business Accelerator can help New Mexican businesses and individuals with some of the challenges associated with taking their product or service into the global market. We can teach businesses about the export-import trade and offer access to our database of international trade leads and joint venture opportunities. For more information about IBA, visit www.nmiba.com.

Finance New Mexico is an initiative of the New Mexico Small Business Investment Corporation (NMSBIC) and its partners to assist individuals and businesses in obtaining skills and funding resources for their business or idea. To learn more about resources available to New Mexicans, go to www.FinanceNewMexico.org.

