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# **Business in Mexico**

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***Managerial Behavior,  
Protocol, and Etiquette***

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**Candace Bancroft McKinniss, EdD  
Arthur A. Natella, Jr., PhD**



**The Haworth Press, Inc.**

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Arthur Natella, Jr., PhD



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Candace Bancroft McKinniss, EdD**, is Associate Professor of Marketing (Business Administration) at Franklin Pierce College in New Hampshire. Her research and writing has focused on consumer behavior. She has had three books accepted for publication and has lectured in the areas of consumer behavior and American business at York College in England and Lincoln University in New Zealand. Dr. McKinniss has spent a number of years in business, principally in the areas of marketing research and training, working with both large companies and smaller service and not-for-profit institutions.

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## Preface

It may not be too bold to state that the cultural contacts between Mexico and the English-speaking world have prepared both countries poorly for the important relations which will be expanding and developing as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Historically, both countries have too often looked at each other with mutual distrust while their social patterns have done more to separate them than to unite them. Specifically, there is a great deal of ignorance of Mexico and of the rest of Latin America in the English-speaking world and this ignorance tends to feed on itself in the development of unfortunate cultural stereotypes that have grown up around the Mexican culture, which I am afraid are already deeply rooted in the minds of citizens of some other countries.

We are living in an age of transition, however, and such ignorance and such stereotypes can no longer stand the test of the real intercultural contact which already exists and which will accelerate greatly in the years to come. In short, we live in a globalized world in which cultures and economies are interdependent. We can no longer live in nationalistic isolation, rather we must increase and redouble our efforts to break down the walls of ignorance and cultural blindness which have separated nations since the beginning of recorded history.

The task, then, for business leaders, academics, and government officials of all countries will be to instruct their fellow countrymen on the subtleties of this increasingly interdependent international society. A new global awareness and sensitivity will have to be created based on a real appreciation of history and tradition as well as psychology and the heritage of art and literature which exists in every developed country.

It is my belief that Professors McKinniss and Natella have taken the lead in such an endeavor, attempting to delineate the Mexican psychology as well as the complexity of its culture in both an aca-

demic and eminently practical guidebook that will be of immense help both to students of international business as well as practicing businessmen and women. They have taken on a formidable task and they have carried it to conclusion with admirable skill which shows their deep knowledge of their subject.

Certainly all who are engaged in international business in Mexico can only benefit from this unique and indispensable volume, and it is to be hoped that this work will find its way into the hands of many who would wish to enter into commercial relations with Mexico on the basis of an open mind bolstered by sensitivity and true cultural awareness of the country they will be visiting.

*Claudio Trulin*  
*President, Mexican National College of Business Administration*  
*and*  
*Professor Emeritus of Business Administration*  
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## Chapter 1

# Introduction: The Human Side

United States business is entering into a new global era in which a knowledge of foreign languages and foreign cultures is becoming increasingly important. Traditionally, U.S. citizens believe their language and culture set the world standard—to conduct business and professional matters in a responsible way is to conduct them the “American way.” Now, however, with the increased competition of other countries and the economic ascendancy of other parts of the world, U.S. citizens must realize that this shrinking world brings about greater contact among people and widely divergent cultures.

### *CULTURAL VALUES*

The result, most recently, is a United States obsession with Japan and the Japanese way of doing business. U.S. citizens often focus on the superficial aspects of Japanese techniques without a full realization that these techniques are the result of a radically different Japanese culture. Likewise, the cultural differences between the U.S. and Latin America are profound and significant. They have arisen as a result of centuries of divergent cultural patterns. In the case of Mexico, it is tempting for U.S. citizens to dismiss such differences as “underdevelopment.” After all, some think, Mexico cannot be as different as other more distant parts of the world since it is a neighbor readily influenced by the cultural and business modalities of its northern business partner. Then, as Mexico does become more industrial, such differences will disappear as a more pragmatic business ethic takes place south of the border.

While it is true that there is a direct influence of business philosophy running from north to south, it is also true that profound cultural differences exist between all of Latin America, including Mexico, and the rest of North America. At the same time, these differences can present even more of an obstacle to U.S. citizens precisely because they are often not as visibly different or exotic as cultural differences between the U.S. and other countries (for example, the Middle and Far East). Yet, in their totality, these cultural differences between the United States and Latin America are vast, and it is important for businesspeople to realize that such differences are not simply arbitrary custom or habit, rather they are rooted in centuries of profound social and historical realities.

If U.S. citizens are to ever understand the nature of business in Mexico, they will not learn it from a travel book or a list of gestures and expressions that can be manipulated or changed at will. On the contrary, people from the United States will have to take the time to study and appreciate the complexity and profundity of Mexican culture as it has developed over centuries.

### ***THE FAMILY***

The family is the basis of society and U.S. citizens trying to begin to understand Mexican culture may have difficulty identifying with and understanding the depth and complexity of Mexican family values. Unlike the United States, which has a longstanding tradition of centering social roles on the individual, Mexican family values are paramount. Mexicans say that one's family is, simply, the most important thing in the world.

Mexicans usually grow up in a strong, closely-knit family unit and the family is the basic unit of Mexican society. Here the concept of family must be interpreted in the broadest sense, including not only parents and children, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Likewise, other relatives may be included in the residential family: a widowed parent, a married son or daughter and his/her spouse, etc.

Whether ethnically Indian, Mestizo, or Spanish, the father is the head of the family. *Machismo*, or the cult of the power of the male, is basic to Hispanic society, and because of this the Latin family

usually includes a strong father figure who dominates the family unit. The authority of the mother is also very important.

In Indian cultures, there is no leisure class and adults and children of both sexes work. By the age of six or seven most children have some work responsibilities in their home or in home industry. They accompany their family to market and fiestas and the whole family is united in work and play.

Children respect and obey their parents and, likewise, godparents are very important in the Mexican family structure. The relationship between the parents and godparents is very strong. While godparents play a direct role during baptism, confirmation, weddings, new house ceremonies, and so forth, their indirect role may be of even more importance.

In Mayan culture, for example, the godparents for the first/eldest child will generally remain godparents for all the rest of the children. To change godparents is considered a social sin. Specifically, the first choice of Mayan parents is the father and mother of the husband. If neither is alive, the wife's parents are selected. If there are no grandparents, a respected couple in the community is asked to take on the role. As a result, Mexicans care deeply about their family and about the ramifications that their individual actions will have on the whole family.

Although the family is very important in the United States, as well, many social commentators have noted that individualism seems to be a more dominant characteristic. Indeed it is very possible that this traditional emphasis given to individual needs and desires has become more pronounced in recent years with the increased importance on the so-called "me culture" in the United States. This has been exemplified by expressions such as "Do your own thing" and popular books preaching about the importance of individual desires and needs over family and the rest of society.

Many social critics have said that the United States has been developing into an increasingly personalistic and individualistic culture as traditional social and community values seem to be fading away. The result has been the increasing attention given to immediate self-gratification, often at the expense of larger social groups that surround the individual.

In contrast with this drive toward immediate self-gratification

and the need for ever more consumer goods, commentators on cultural perspectives have noted the contrast between this culture of "becoming" with other cultures that tend to emphasize the culture of "being." This is to say that a country such as the United States puts a high value on personal as well as national transition—it is always in the state of becoming something else, supposedly something better, while Mexican culture pays more attention to the moment and the human interactions that are at hand.

While such generalizations must be handled with great care, lest they lend themselves to unfortunate and inaccurate stereotypes, the implications for such a cultural difference are immense, both on the personal and national level. In business, for example, cultural differences may easily translate into a less generalized materialism and a less rigid work ethic with the corresponding change in personal motivation.

Though it would be a mistake not to mention that consumerism and the materialistic society that creates such attitudes has had a profound influence in many parts of the world, it would also be a mistake to believe that all cultures have changed to adopt such values wholeheartedly or are in the process of being completely Americanized. Nevertheless there have been social changes in recent years, particularly among Mexican middle-class families. Women work and, with a rise in the education level of women in urban areas, women attend universities and many now hold responsible jobs in government and private sectors.

It is not unusual for a Mexican middle-class child to have attended summer camp, high school, and college in the U.S. Most families report having vacationed north of the border on at least two different occasions. From tourist resorts in Mexico, many have been exposed and are accustomed to U.S. styles and taste and so Halloween and Santa Claus are practiced along with the Day of the Dead and gifts from the Baby Jesus on Christmas Eve.

In Mexico, the strength and profundity of family traditions and social connections has real importance in business and professional life. While businesspeople from the U.S. are products of a technocracy in which more importance can be given to the professional qualifications than to family background, Mexicans tend to give greater importance to family associations and connections. As a

result Mexicans give more importance to judging a person they meet on the basis of his or her *cultura*, referring to outward signs of breeding and good manners as well as general knowledge of culture. U.S. citizens, on the other hand, with their extremely pragmatic and individualistic bent, tend to judge people on the basis of their education or professional position alone. Likewise, by not valuing personal relationships and connections as much as Mexicans, U.S. citizens often assume that they will get an interview with a Mexican business or professional counterpart simply on the strength of a company name.

With experience in Mexican society, however, U.S. businesspeople have found that Mexicans may be less likely to speak to strangers on an impromptu basis without knowing who recommended them and who they know in their office or field. While personal connections are, of course, important anywhere in the world, networks of associations and recommendations are especially important in Mexican business and professional life.

### **MALE-FEMALE RELATIONS**

A discussion of male-female relations in Mexico should probably begin with a discussion of marriage. Marriage, according to Catholic morality, is a lifetime arrangement. However, a double moral standard exists between the fidelity expectations placed upon males and females. Because a woman's principal obligation is to make a home and procreate, she is dedicated to a life of service and no infidelity on her part is tolerated. Even though Mexican women joined their husbands in battle during the Revolution (cooking, caring for wounds, and conducting burials), they were not granted suffrage until 1953 and were regularly instructed as to how to vote by their husbands.

Even with all the changes brought about in Mexico by its women's movement, men tend to be very jealous of their working wives and fear humiliation. They also fear that their wives may become attracted to others and become less dependent on them economically and intellectually. Most marital problems reported for middle-class families stem from the professional interests of the wives more than philandering.



As a result, Mexico is a country with different standards for different family roles. Women are expected to remain pure and pass culture on to the next generation, however, in cities and in the north, women are increasingly expected to work in home industry or outside the home in order to bring in a second income. Men are the providers: they put up with the hazards and treachery of the outside world in order to provide for their families, and expect that they will be rewarded at home for their efforts.

Because of the culture of *machismo*, businesswomen, when traveling alone, can expect the likelihood of unwelcome sexual advances: overly long eye contact, the pressing of legs under a table, and overemphasis on how appealing one looks. Like men from the U.S., Mexican men often expect to be turned down and the assumption that it was no more than a flirtation and not “truly” intended is the easiest refusal. Women should also note that Mexican men, with their deep tans and handsome European fashions, may be very attractive, but just as in the U.S., one cannot expect to entertain a sexual relationship and be taken seriously in the boardroom.

Women should take care not to entertain a man alone, as on a date, but should do so in a group. One woman explained that, upon arriving at her hotel, she introduced herself to and tipped the concierge, manager, and bell captain, explained who she was, where she was from, the length of her stay, and her business plans. As a result, she got tremendous service and a lot of helpful attention.

### ***THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY***

Anyone who spends a good deal of time in Mexico arrives at the conclusion that there is not one Mexico, but many. The country was first organized as a result of a series of markets. These markets were the only places in which trade was conducted. Everything was sold there, from foodstuffs to the finest cloths and from jewels to slaves. Different goods were kept in separate sections, as is the case in department stores today. The Aztecs had fixed days for the market and laws forced people to attend these market days with their wares, actually fining them for selling their goods along the way.

These markets became both commercial and social entities. One met, made friends, and socialized there. In time, these commercial