

Chapter 14 – Orlando Hidalgo, Hotelier, Cosmopolitan

Orlando has been my friend since the mid-1990's. One of the first stories I published in a national (now defunct, but it was not my fault) magazine was about his spa in Cuernavaca. It was also the first article published about his spa. The resulting publicity sold him on the value of travel writers and sold this travel writer on the value of starting a travel agency to actually make money from my articles. As the Fates would have it, I sold my agency and returned to writing, not because the money was any better, but because the aggravations were less. Orlando has kept up with his spa, though with the economic crises that started in 2008, who knows what the future holds for any of us. Orlando and I remained friends over the years apart from any business. He is fifty years old.

Orlando, since your business has been dealing with foreign tourists, what misconceptions do they generally have about Mexico and the people of Mexico?

I am reminded of a story about Maria Felix, Mexico's most famous actress.

[Maria Felix was born in April 8, 1914 in Alamos, Sonora and died on April 8, 2002 in Mexico City. She had been called Mexico's Marilyn Monroe. She starred in films produced around the world: Mexico, France, Italy, Spain, Argentina. She was also famous for her jet-setting lifestyle and thoroughbred horses and racing. She was also politically active].

Maria Felix had an affair with then-President Miguel Aleman and she was barred from Mexico by Aleman's wife (for the duration of his term). Felix lived in Europe in the 1950's and was asked, "Is it true that everyone in Mexico is barefoot?"

"Yes, we are such a fabulous country that we have afforded ourselves the luxury of carpeting the entire county."

Many people think Mexico is New Mexico.

Interesting. Since I was born in Las Cruces, New Mexico, I can attest to the veracity of this. I remember a famous example of letters not being delivered to one of our congressmen because they did not have the proper "foreign" postage. I also personally had the joy of getting a cell phone bill for several thousand dollars for calls made from New Mexico when I was traveling. When I called to contest, the representative offered to sign me up for their "Call Mexico" plan so I would not pay as much to call Albuquerque in the future. I'm sorry, please go on.

Sure. Another stereotype that Americans have is that Mexicans are dishonest. This is the stereotype of the Frito Bandito. In general there is a greater moral base, greater true family values. In general terms they are a better people. What has kept the fabric of the Mexican society together is the cohesion of family values.

Another myth is that they are dumb. The opposite is actually true, as anyone who has spent any time with Mexicans knows. Mexicans, in general, are very creative.

Anybody who has had their car fixed by a Mexican mechanic can attest to their creativity in making repairs with limited materials. Could some of these stereotypes be attributed to what Americans see as a lack of education in Mexico, or at least, less formal education than the United States?

Maybe there is not a high level of formal education. But I think culturally Mexico as a society is far more advanced than the United States. Mexicans are going to know more about the world around them. Mexicans are more aware of global politics, in general, than Americans.

Many people have commented on the “fatalism” of the Mexican people. What is your take on that?

I don't know that there is such fatalism. Making the best with what you have attitude. Instead of licking your wounds and saying woe is me. I see this as an optimistic trait.

Is the middle-class growing or shrinking, in your experience?

The middle class is not shrinking. Last week there was a special on television 1968-2008-40 years from Tlatelolco.

[Tlatelolco was the site of the infamous student massacre in the Tlatelolco section of Mexico City ten days before the start of the Olympic Games].

In 1968, there were 300,000 cars. Today there are 3.8 million cars in Mexico City alone.

Ten years ago most cars were all *bochos*, [Volkswagen Beetles] or junkers. Everybody got rid them. You do not see as many old cars in Mexico as you used to.

We were commenting on that during a driving trip to the interior a few years ago. There are more new cars than clunkers on the road today.

There is more construction; more single family dwellings Small houses of 700-800 square feet are being built. People now for the first time own the roof above their head. That is progress.

Do you see a difference between the definitions of middle-class in Mexico versus the United States?

The big difference between the US and Mexico is that the United States has a fictitious economy. There is a middle class that does not exist. And upper middle classes do not exist. They have been created by credit – credit cards and loans for houses. So all of a

sudden (2009), you are living off borrowed money. If you look at that solidly, that is a make-believe society.

In Mexico until eight years ago, if you owned your house, you owned it. There were no bank loans. It was the same for cars. There was a solid middle class. It was realistic. Now credit has eased up, as it did before 1995 when there was the debacle.

[He was referring to the economic crises of 1994-1995, when, due to the economic policies of ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gotari, but in the beginning of the term of President Ernest Zedillo, the Mexican peso collapsed by about half in a period of two weeks. At the time of the interview, the peso had declined by about forty percent against the US dollar, although over a period of months].

In the last ten years the middle class has had the opportunity to buy a home. Today the standard loan is 20 years with 20% to 25% down – with a 12% to 14% interest rate. This again lends to stability. You don't get a subprime mess like in the United States. You can see this growth in home building by going to the outskirts of any city. You will see lots of cookie-cutter homes of 800 square feet.

You get an infinite credit. ARA, Casas GEO they are being built with class and a little bit of style. For every 4-6 rows of homes there are swimming pools. This is quality of life.

Is life more difficult for the average Mexican today than it was twenty years ago?

Absolutely.

Do the wife and husband have to work?

Yes they do. Today there are two cars in the family because both have to get to work.

Orlando, others I've interviewed disagree with you. Why do you think others have told me that middle class is shrinking?

Middle class is a mentality. A big component of being middle-class is having education. More people are getting schooled in Mexico today. Middle class is also growing because there is a leniency of credit.

When I moved to Mexico from Cuba twenty years ago, only the rich people had credit cards. Now most people have them. In 1987 I moved from Miami and other places. I left Cuba when I was three years old. I am a Mexican resident. I have seen the country evolve and change.

It is a struggling middle-class. Mexico is not a bargain. Not even domestic help is cheap anymore. Girls don't want to work domestically anymore. There is a stigma to that. The women would rather work at a checkout counter at eighty pesos a day than as a *chacha*, a derogatory term for maid.

How are people able to survive on such small incomes?

There was a special on TV about the culture of the Mexican society today recently. They compared our society to *muegano*, which is a pastry; a caramel with nuts. And they lump them all together. The people are called *la familia muegano*. It is the mentality. You take care of your own, even if you get married. You do not send old people to nursing homes. It is like the Chinese society in that respect.

It is all about economy. You keep adding floors or rooms to your house and everybody lives there and it becomes much easier to survive. Maybe their incomes are not that high. Family is the most important. There is no comparison in the way Americans refer to their family.

What is family life in Mexico like today?

It has changed in the sense that today you don't take two hours for lunch and businesses don't close. But you still ask your children who they are hanging out with. You still know where your kids are and who their friends are. In the States parents never see their children. They never look 'em in the eyes.

Family values in Mexico really means the value of the family. You are involved in your children's life. There is cohesion between the grandchildren. Parents still do homework with their children. And they pick their children up at school.

It is a hands-on raising of the children. The parents are involved in the lives of their children. That has offset some of the negative effects of the U.S. on Mexico.

There is a drug problem but not like the States. There is an ecstasy problem and a cocaine problem. It cuts across classes. It used to be that only the lower classes did drugs. Now they are in all strata of society.

Is it more difficult to do business in Mexico?

My experience has been that it is easier for me. In the past twenty-one years I would never have been able to have what I have or be where I am today had I stayed in the States. The competition in the States is very difficult. In my situation, to open a spa as I did and be as successful as I was would not have happened in the States.

Why would it not?

Because I would have needed a tremendous amount of capital. It is all so corporate. In Mexico if you had a good idea there was less competition. Today everybody is more educated and more competitive.

But I still believe that the American idea was lost in America. If you work hard you will be a success. Nowadays if you work hard and you persevere you will still find it hard to be a successful entrepreneur like Getty, Rockefeller etc.

In Mexico if you work hard and work with integrity you will be successful.

The values that the American economy started on apply more than ever in Mexico than in the States. If you have a good idea, if you work hard, if you have a business of integrity you can still be successful.

Some would argue the opposite, that political corruption makes doing business more difficult.

Corruption is much, **much** better than it used to be. As a citizen you do not have to play into that corruption. If I am driving, for instance, and I get stopped by a cop and I have made an infraction, it is easier to pay a *mordida*, than to take the ticket and do things the right way. That is how most people did things in the past. But now about fifty percent of people don't pay the *mordida*. That is a big change in society.

The government has made it much easier to do that in the right way. I can say that first hand. We have two corporations.

Why do so many people have MLM jobs as well as regular jobs?

People are no longer sitting on their hands and letting life go by as in the old days. Today they think, "I am striving to become middle class, because my kids are going to college. What can I do to make that happen?" That is what is pushing the society.

How has society changed in the past twenty years?

People no longer accept their lot in life. They are no longer being victimized by Fate.

Stress has permeated society on every level. You are still going to enjoy your life and take Sunday off. In the States people officially work forty hours week, five days a week. In Mexico, the official week is forty-eight hours and a six-day workweek. But you still have time to enjoy their life and family and friends.

What do you think about Mexicans who go north to the United States to work?

They belie the biggest misconception that Mexicans are lazy. There is a tenacity that has evolved from necessity. People do want a better quality of life. If you ask the Mexicans who had come to the United States to work illegally if their goal in life was to risk their lives and leave their families and friends and go to a land where they are rejected and outcasts, "So is this what you want to do with your life? Is this is your life dream?" They will tell you no. They will tell you that they are doing it out of necessity, to make a better life. These are not lazy people.

Thank you.

No, thank you.

END