

Chapter 16 – Jose Ibarrola – Selling Protection Against The Future

Jose Ibarrola sells insurance in Morelia. He is friendly, outgoing and sincere. He is a good salesman, but not from the rah-rah mold that many American salesmen come from. The difference in sales techniques emphasizes what some others have said about one difference between the Mexican and the American cultures – Mexicans tend to listen better. Whether this is true or a stereotype that Mexicans have about Americans is subject to debate. All I can say for sure is that Jose listens quite well. He is a thoughtful man and gave a great deal of attention to what he said before he said it. After the interview, we went off to a restaurant with a group of his friends and spent the evening telling stories and learning about each other's cultures.

Jose, what are the major changes you've seen in Mexican society in the last twenty years or so?

I think we have been changing a lot in the last twenty years. One aspect is that we have been opening our border. I think we need more changes. I am very involved with politics. In that area we have seen many political changes in Mexico but we need more changes. We need to act with more knowledge of the world than we have right now.

Would you say that Mexico is less insular than it used to be?

Mexico is now looking outward, not just inward. I see that in our youngsters. The Internet and cable TV are two examples of how we are being made aware that we [all the countries of the world] are more interconnected.

Did you go to University?

I studied economics at the University of Michoacán. I worked while going to school and kept working after I graduated.

Insurance in Mexico is a new concept, no?

Yes. The market is growing because there is more confidence by the people in insurance companies. Now people are aware that the insurance companies are more trustful. This was not always the case.

Why do you think it changed?

I think it has been a maturing in society. The companies are trying to be more fair with their clients and more serious about the work they do. The international competition has increased the seriousness of our companies.

Some people say that the increased competition from international companies, which is happening in all industries, is a bad thing and others say it is good. How do you feel about this?

I think, in this situation, when the markets were closed, when we didn't have foreign trade, the companies weren't always fair with the people [consumers]. Many sectors of the country are trying to get rid of this fear.

Health insurance is a growing industry as is life insurance. There is much competition and companies are very serious about it. One new thing is that people can now pay their premiums monthly through a credit card.

Paying monthly is a new thing for Mexico.

Do you feel that there is a feeling of being second-class or of being inferior to the rest of the world in Mexico?

Sometimes, yes. I have been dealing with that type of situation. That statement is not reality at all. It is a perception that some people have. What is the problem here? It is not the race. If you see a Mexican in Europe he is going to identify with that society. I think that if you are a person and you want to grow and go ahead and improve your life, you can do it.

In the United States, we have an entrepreneurial society. Some people say it is harder to do in Mexico. What do you think?

We Mexicans have a little bit of idiosyncrasies, that many people are tied to thinking they cannot develop. In the same way, I know people who have become entrepreneurs from nothing, I mean from **nothing**. They have become successful people. I think that we have the idiosyncrasies that don't let us forget, for example, political things, historical things that happened too many years ago. People are tied to those things. We have to get rid of that and grow as a nation, as a people. We have to stop looking backward. It is like we have a ships anchor holding us to the past.

Do you feel that people look too much to the past?

Yes, in many ways. It is a sense of identity. For example there is the situation with the North Americans. There are sometimes problems that involve North American industry. Some people focus on the *gringos* for our failures. We are neighbors. In some ways we need each other. We need to live like neighbors and not focus on the past.

Most of the Mexicans we North Americans come into contact with are mojudos or illegals. It seems that if somebody is from a lower economic class, they view going to the United States as the only way they can improve their lives. If they are from a higher economic class, they would not want to live in the United States, because they view life

here as better. They view life in the United States as too fast, not friendly. Is this accurate?

I think that is true. I think that the government hasn't done the right thing to make the lower class people have more chances here. Not in giving them free things, but in offering or providing education, or opportunities to start a business, to tell them you don't have to go to the United States. In the middle-classes, we think that there are problems in the United States. We think that life there [if we lived there] would not be so easy, particularly in the beginning. I think that lately, there are more upper classes moving to the States.

For the middle class, they don't have that option. They have to work to improve their life by working in Mexico.

For you, if all things were equal, if you could live here in Morelia or anywhere in the United States, where would you choose to live and why? What are the benefits and drawbacks to living in Mexico or in the United States, as you see it?

Many times, I like the States when I visit. I think that living there you have many things we don't have here. But in Mexico, we have a better standard of living. Our country has been in a peaceful situation and many other countries of the world do not have this. We have the comforts. You don't have to have two or three jobs in a day.

This is a little difficult, to answer this question. I have been to the United States and Canada many times. One thing that immediately makes living in Mexico better than living in the United States or Canada is the climate.

One thing I have noticed is that, while a person can make more money in the United States, people make work a primary focus of their lives.

It is more difficult to raise children in the United States, children are more independent. In Mexico life is more tranquil in this aspect. There is more "liberation" of teenagers in the United States than in Mexico – liberation in sexual matters, for example. In Mexico there are brakes on this from the extended family.

Do you think children in Mexico still have the respect for their teachers that they used to?

A teacher still has respect in this society, more than in the United States. I have heard some terrible things about respect for teachers in the United States. A friend of mine went to California and he returned very surprised. He went to visit relatives who lived there. He visited a school and all the pupils were shouting at the teachers and principals. I don't know if that is the general society, but that is what he saw and it was in the Spanish sector.

Do you see the society providing more opportunities for young people to stay in Mexico?

What we need, I think, is changes in the structure of the society and the government. There is still much corruption in Mexico. For example we have corruption in many sectors of the economy. This is a society with many factors. We have much potential.

What do you think about the maquiladoras?

I think in one respect they are a good thing. In the respect that they provide jobs. Although some say that they exploit the workers, I do not know. I think it is better to have work. I think they are good for the country in that they enable us to produce more and to produce better products than we used to. I believe this elevates the level of production in Mexico in general. It gives us better products to export.

Could you explain what you really like about being a Mexican and living in Mexico?

This is a country with much tranquility. We have our problems. We can have a good standard of living. We don't have a life that is very hard or difficult and we have many liberties. The society helps to maintain certain values and family values.

Is life insurance a growing business in México now?

I think so. The insurance companies are getting serious about this. They are using actuarial tables to determine their rates. The people I sell life insurance to, most of them maintain their policy. Very rarely do they cancel them. The companies now are in a very competitive market. So they are launching very aggressive plans. So this makes life insurance affordable.

Is automobile insurance mandatory?

It depends on the state of México you are in. In some states yes, but in most no. I think in Nuevo Leon and maybe Chihuahua are two. Here in Michoacán, not yet. I don't understand why the government charges so much in taxes to own a car, but doesn't make insurance mandatory. If someone has an accident they lose a lot of money. It would make the policies cheaper if everyone bought insurance. Right now you can buy a liability policy for around 1,500 pesos a year. With that you will be free of very big problems.

[At the time, that was about \$150 USD. That was comparable to a policy for a foreigner driving to México and buy an insurance policy, which cost in US dollars \$100 - \$140, depending on the company].

Please tell me if this question offends you, but would you be willing to say how much money you make? [In general, Mexicans were quite willing to answer this question. I finally stopped asking it because it is too easy to fall into making the minutiae important. The majority of people in this book made between 20,000 to 40,000 pesos a month, except for the physicians who made more].

Sure, no problem. I made between 20,000 and 30,000 pesos a month.

Do you feel that puts you in the middle of the middle-class?

My wife even works now, so that helps. It is not a formal business. [AUTHOR'S NOTE: The concept of the degrees of middle-class were difficult to grasp. Although everyone seemed to know what the middle-class was and that they were part of it, the stratification of it did not translate well. Other interviewees explained this in detail].

I have talked to a lot of people who sell Avon or Amway or something like that.

Yes, yes, that's it! It is common to do that. It is something that helps her to have her own money.

Is it more common now for wives to work?

Yeah, yeah, [he said sadly] I think much more now. That has been changing a lot in México.

Is it also common for many people to work two or three jobs?

Two jobs. I think that working more than two jobs is too hard. I think most people work just one or two jobs.

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: You will notice that there is not one definite answer to this question. I believe it depends on the interviewee's own experiences with his peers, rather than a statistical societal observation read in a newspaper. My own feeling is that there are probably more people working two jobs than not].

There are so many similarities between our two countries: both husband and wife work, some people work two jobs, it is almost impossible for just one person to work and have what we consider a good life.

Do you expect to pay for your children to go to college?

Yes. Right now, we are not sure if it will be a public college or a private college. There are several private universities in Mexico. Some are more expensive and some are more affordable. I think that Tec de Monterrey is the most expensive. In my case I think I can afford a medium university. Some of my sisters have their children in medium-priced university.

If a child graduates from a medium-priced university, can they still get a good job?

I think so. I mean I studied in a public university. One of my classmates, this guy was a really smart boy and I think one year before graduation, he even got a scholarship and he went to a specialized program at a university in Austria. You have the chance if you study. Another of my classmates went to France and is working there now in European industry. You can improve if you want. I have a brother, he is studying at a university in the United States.

Are there many scholarships for students to study in Mexico?

I think there is growth in this area. The government is giving scholarships for students to study outside Mexico.

Outside Mexico?

Yes, definitely. Europe and the United States mainly.

That fits in with what I have experienced. I have met many government officials over the years and many of them studied outside Mexico and they came back to Mexico to work.

The government encourages people to study outside Mexico to bring new ideas into the country. But there is a problem- not with the public scholarships. I think you have to complete some work for the good of the country when you finish. But for others who can go abroad, it is very easy for them to apply in the States or Europe and take a job there. It is hard to be in the shoes of those people. I don't know what I would do if I was offered the same opportunities. But it is something that unfortunately, if those people could stay in Mexico, they could help to change and improve the country.

One executive I talked to was a high-level manager for a big company and he had reached a certain level of salary and responsibility. He felt he would never advance higher, because he was not part of the family that owned the business. Whereas he felt that with his credentials, if he was in the United States he could have gone farther. Do you think this is accurate?

I heard a story from someone who was working at a very important company in Mexico that was owned by an old family. If you join the company, you have to start from the bottom. Any new person who starts there has to start at the bottom, even if he is family. So in that case, it is the opposite. But in general, I think that what you said is right. If you are family, you will always be higher than someone else, even if he is more qualified. In Mexico many companies are owned by families instead of big corporations or the corporations are controlled by families.

Actually, that was the experience of the son of the owner of an insurance company I interviewed. So you think it is pretty common that you have to start at the bottom?

Yes, I think it is. For example, in the banks that is the way it is. The managers I know start at the bottom, learn from the bottom. The banks are a very accurate example. Anybody who comes, even from the University, they teach their own method of management.

Some people say that customer service is improving in Mexico. What do you think?

I think that now we have that. There has been some change. But not everywhere. Because I think we have to change the old-time focus. We have to think in terms of service. If you give good service to your clients, your clients will recommend you. If you want to give good service, you have to change the old idea that you just want the money from the person. That's not going to work today.

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Well, yes, I was thinking that there is something that got in my mind that someone once said that Mexico and the United States have a common destiny. I think that if both countries could try or sample each other's culture, if we both, the United States and Mexico, could share our advantages, we are going to improve as neighbor nations. For example I think that one thing we have lost a lot is the tourists from the United States. For example, we no longer see those big caravans of trailers. Right now, we have the good roads so that they could drive from Texas to the beaches in Michoacán, but they don't know that. I mean they are undeveloped beaches. If you give security, they would come. We don't need to build up a lot of hotels. That's for one sector of the tourists. But what about all the people who come driving from Texas and all those Southern

states? I mean, from McAllen, we are twelve hours driving. I think that is something that were are missing out on.

What if there were more opportunities for Mexicans to come within fifty miles of the border? If our governments would open their minds to these and other opportunities. In the states of Baja California and Sonora they are aware of the importance of these tourists who drive. They made it easy to enter and the roads are excellent.

Gracias por su tiempo, Jose.

Al contrario, gracias a tú.